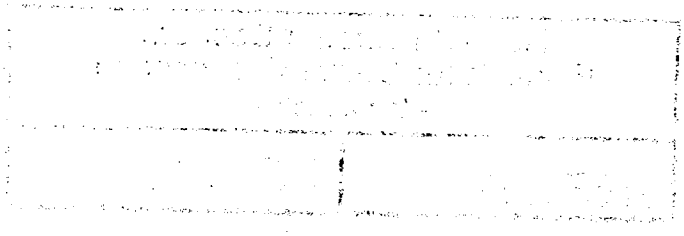
Stefan Immerfall · Göran Therborn
Editors

Handbook of European Societies

Social Transformations in the 21st Century



Springer

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ISBN 978-0-387-88198-0 (hardcover)
ISBN 978-1-4419-8128-8 (softcover)
e-ISBN 978-0-387-88199-7
DOI 10.1007/978-0-387-88199-7
Springer New York Dordrecht Heidelberg London

Library of Congress Control Number: 2009939454

Acknowledgement

Support of the Wissenschaftszentrum/Social Science Center Berlin (WZB) for this handbook is gratefully acknowledged.

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Editors

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Chapter 13
Life Course

Heather Hofmeister

13.1 The Life Course Perspective as an Orienting Strategy

People shape the direction of their lives with every action and decision they make, but they do so within the framework of society. Society shapes possible actions and decisions in ways that are sometimes obvious – like being required to go to war – and sometimes not obvious – such as when to become a parent. Life course research brings all other kinds of social science research into a time and place dimension, doing what C. Wright Mills calls for in the sociological imagination, the linking of individual human life with the social circumstances, history, and other features of the society: "The sociological imagination enables us to grasp history and biography and the relations between the two within society. That is its task and its promise" (Mills 1959: 2).

The core question scientists pose in the area of life course research is, how does an individual construct a life within historical and social events and constraints? How does a person mix his or her specific skills, goals, chances, obstacles, and past experiences together with the influences of other people and the geographic and social place and time where he or she resides? To what degree can an individual indeed actively construct a life, or are lives constructed mostly by outside forces like institutions and policies in society, wishes and expectations and requirements of others, or historical events? I will give some suggestions to these questions from contemporary life course research.

Each human being has certain abilities, goals, interests, and skills, a set of resources called human agency. Each individual's life is linked to others through networks of relationships to others, both chosen and inevitable. Each person every moment is situated in a particular context: this place at this time. Each person has had specific and unique past experiences. Each person ages, in tandem with historical time. These are the very things that make each human being and each life different from every other. And these are the very things of interest to life course researchers.

Life course researchers study the ways time and place shape individuals and the ways individuals also shape their times and places (Fig. 13.1). Studying the life course means investigating pathways, connections between phases of life, and circumstances over time (Moen 1995; Moen et al. 1992) with the goal of "explaining how dynamic worlds change people and how people select and construct their environments" (Elder 1995: 102).

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S. Immerfall and G. Therborn (eds.), *Handbook of European Societies*, DOI 10.1007/978-0-387-88199-7_13,

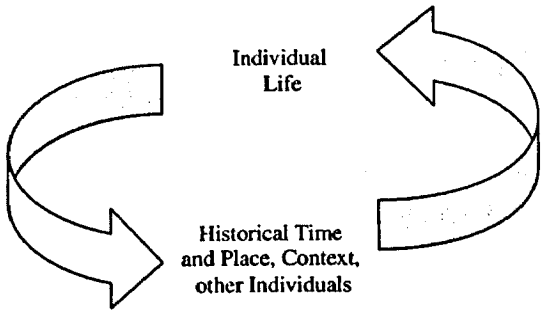

Fig. 13.1 The reciprocal influence of the individual on his or her historical time and place

This chapter is different from other chapters in this volume. Whereas other chapters focus on a discrete subject area, this chapter will describe a way of thinking about and studying many subject areas. The life course is a perspective on the way human beings live across time and place. A diverse and changing Europe situated within an ever-more connected world makes this perspective supremely valuable. In this chapter, I first describe the life course as an orienting strategy for social science research, next lay out its primary concepts and relationships, and then finally give examples of research and findings that use a life course perspective to help explain contemporary European lives.

13.1.1 The Life Course: An Orienting Strategy

I conceive of the life course as an empirical orienting strategy or perspective, although it has also been called a theory, a metatheory, and a paradigm. Orienting strategies tell us what to consider important and what to ignore, and how to handle the information we consider important (Wagner 1984). An orienting strategy provides guidelines for approaching phenomena by establishing definitions of, and relationships among, concepts. It suggests the orientation of the theorist to the phenomena. Finally, it provides conceptual schema for how to use these definitions and relationships for building hypotheses and theories (Wagner 1984).

Orienting strategies tend to be so broad as to be untestable. The components *within* the orienting strategy are testable; in fact, the value of the orienting strategy is determined by how useful the theoretical statements are that are generated from it, not by whether it is true or false in itself, and by the usefulness of the framework it provides for establishing testable hypotheses and theories. Put another way, "one does not demonstrate the empirical truth or falsity of an orienting strategy; one *employs* an orienting strategy to demonstrate the truth or falsity of other ideas" (Wagner 1984: 27). One can use an orienting strategy such as the life course to organize other theories or other orienting strategies. For example, one can take a life course orientation and apply also an ethnographic, functionalist, rational choice, or conflict theory approach to the same research. I will show examples later in the chapter.

Paradigms and orienting strategies differ in that paradigms tend to reign supreme over a discipline and are mutually exclusive to each other. For example, Newtonian physics in its day was the only way to do physics, but has been replaced by the paradigm of quantum mechanics. By contrast, orienting strategies can coexist with each other (Wagner

1984). Theories and orienting strategies differ in that a theory is meant directly to generate hypotheses to be tested and should (in principle) be able to be disproven, whereas an orienting strategy organizes the information that would go into a theory test.

Some scholars use the life course perspective to describe the social system's impact on individuals (Elder 1995). This approach puts extra emphasis on the ways structures impact the individual. Other scholars tend more heavily to embed the individual in networks of relationships that impact the individual (Giele and Elder 1998a; Hofmeister and Moen 1999). Yet another focus of life course research sees the individual as an active agent in constructing the life course (Mills and Blossfeld 2005). But all life course scholars acknowledge that all of these influences create an individual's life course. I now describe the fundamental concepts of the life course perspective: human agency, linked lives, context, and timing, giving examples of each.

13.2 Components of the Life Course Perspective

13.2.1 Human Agency

The principle of human agency as part of the life course perspective views the individual as an active agent in shaping his or her own life chances according to his or her own goals, abilities, and sense of self (Elder 1995, Giele and Elder 1998). This means that human agency – the ability of individuals to make decisions about their own lives that have impact – is expressed through both early actions and decisions that have lingering consequences as well as continuing behaviors or behaviors that change course. Examples of change include returning to or leaving school, getting married or divorced, deciding to have a child, or changing jobs (Blossfeld, Klijzing, Mills, and Kurz 2005).

Human agency is reflected by an individual's own self-definitions and goals, a point I will illustrate by example. Some women consider themselves primary household earners, others see themselves as secondary earners, and still other women think they should *not* have a role in earning a living but should rather be supported by men's earnings or by the state. These varying attitudes have strong effects on whether or not the women themselves participate in paid labor at all and for how many hours a week (Herring and Wilsonsadberry 1993; Lück 2006). It is also true that women's experience with paid work shapes their attitudes about it (Moen et al. 1997). Women (and the men in their lives) are likely to match their opinion about their lifestyles with the reality of their situations. As an example, most part-time working women believe that breadwinning should be the primary (but not exclusive) responsibility of men, and they see women as secondary earners whose primary (but not exclusive) responsibility is homemaking, care-giving, and domestic work (Blossfeld and Hakim 1997a). People tend to match their attitudes to their actions, but their attitudes also are shaping the actions they choose to take. To use another example, the same attitudes about the proper roles of men and women influence whether people are willing to marry someone with a different level of education than they themselves have. Those who believe that men should be primary breadwinners are likely to avoid partnerships where the woman's educational or earnings level exceeds the man's, because the male breadwinner norm defines wives as secondary providers and a better-educated or higher-earning wife may out-earn her husband and be the primary provider (Blossfeld and Drobnic 2001; Blossfeld and Timm 2003).

There are many examples of human agency's effects on life courses in contemporary Europe. Throughout Europe as well as North America, human agency plays a role in the chances of young people to get their first jobs. Those youth who have more education are at lower risk of having temporary contracts, unemployment, and staying trapped in insecure first job positions (Blossfeld et al. 2005). The European labor market has changed in the last two decades of the 20th century, especially in the experience of young people entering the labor market. In most countries with the exception of Ireland, entry to the labor market became more difficult for young people in the 1990s (Mills et al. 2005). Young people exercise their own human agency by deciding how they respond to these changes. Some choose to stay in university or advanced study longer. Others postpone having a family or a partnership until things are more settled. One consequence is a rising age at first marriage, illustrated in Figs. 13.2 and 13.3, and a parallel rising age at first birth.

The principle of human agency is expressed in this volume in, for example, the chapters on collective action, deviance and crime, education, gender, identity, labor, leisure preferences and access.

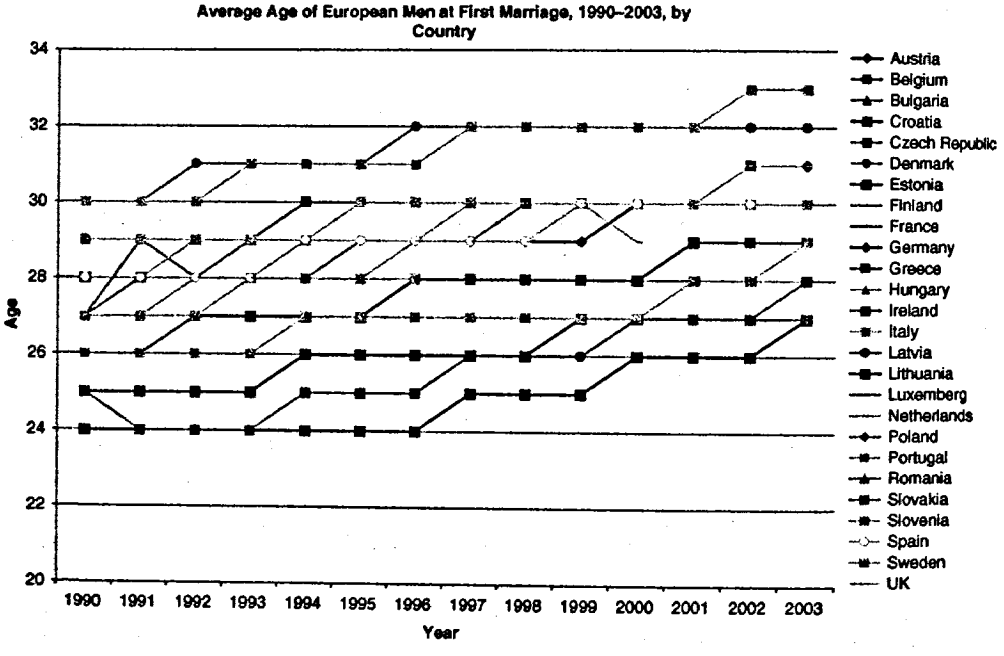

Fig. 13.2 Average age of European men at first marriage, 1990–2003, by country
Eurostat, online database, http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu, extraction: 25.04.2007; UNICEF: TransMONEE database 2006, UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre (IRC), Florence. Accessed on 18 August 2008. Missing datapoints are inferred as the average of the data on either side of the missing data.

13.2.2 Linked Lives

Of course, an individual does not direct his or her life without other influences. The life course perspective recognizes that an individuals' life is connected with the lives and decisions of many other people. It recognizes a two-way street of influence between the self (ego) and each "close other" (alter) in a person's life: parents and children, a spouse,

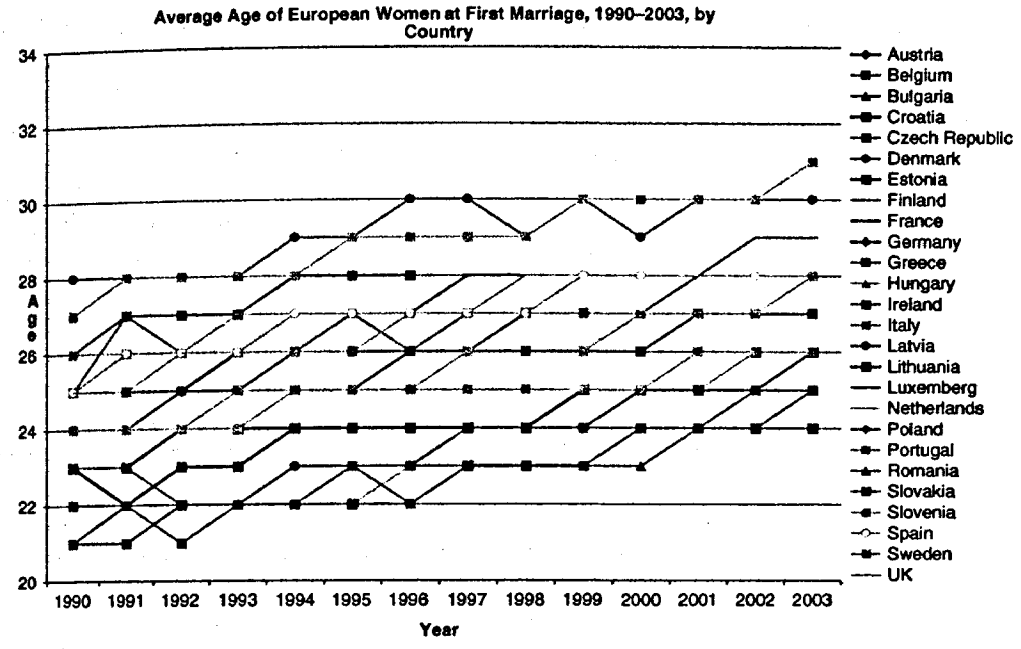

Fig. 13.3 Source: Eurostat, online database, http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu, extraction: 25.04.2007; UNICEF: TransMONEE database 2006, UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre (IRC), Florence. Accessed on 18. August 2008. Missing datapoints are inferred as the average of the data from the years on either side of the missing year.

siblings, friends, employees, coworkers, and employers. The individual's development is influenced by these others, and at the same time the individual also influences the others (Elder 1995). The influence is not always intentional, but it occurs because of the proximity of the lives and the social nature of human beings.

When one applies the concept of linked lives across time, one sees also that people are affected by the choices and circumstances of earlier and later generations. Decisions can be made by parents that affect their children and even their grandchildren, such as migration decisions or whether to allow or support a child to attend university. For example, much research on social capital focuses on how the life chances of young people are affected by the education levels or occupation levels of their parents (Breen and Goldthorpe 2001; Erikson and Goldthorpe 1992; Miller and Hayes 1990; Shavit and Blossfeld 1993). This research is using the concept of linked lives to hypothesize and test the predictors of overall education level. To use another example, research shows that employed wives are likely to retire from their jobs around the same time their husbands retire, even if they would prefer to keep working or are not yet eligible for retirement benefits (Hofmeister and Moen 1998; Smith and Moen 1998). Other research examines what happens to women's employment at marriage (Blossfeld 1995; Blossfeld and Hofmeister 2006). Studies find that husbands influenced their wives employment a great deal in the past: women had a high likelihood to quit their jobs at marriage in Europe but are much less likely to do so at the end of the 20th century. In fact, today across parts of Northern Europe (as well as North America) where wives' incomes are very important for the well-being of the family, young men increasingly prefer to marry women with a high income potential (Blossfeld and Timm 2003: 333).

Linked lives are highly relevant where children are concerned. A new parent has the choice to reduce or eliminate paid work and stay home with children, in principle, only if he or she is in a partnership with someone who is willing to support the household

financially, or lives in a country where new parents are supported with public funds, or is self-supporting. In places where finding external childcare is difficult or non-existent, parents who both have paid employment rely on grandparents for childcare, if grandparents are willing and able. The principle of linked lives is helpful for asking important questions about one of the ways lives are organized and outcomes are determined.

Initiatives of the European Union are changing the context in which lives are or become linked. I describe more about context below, but examples of the new linkages of lives are many. For one, the Bologna Process initiatives encourage students to study outside their home countries, increasing the likelihood that they will form friendships and even lifelong partnerships with people from outside their own culture or language. Another example is the European Commission's priority on job mobility across national borders. Borderless work, international operations, and developing new markets are catchy phrases that in reality mean that individuals are traveling far from home or relocating for work. If these workers are young people before establishing a family, such long-distance relocation or commuting limits their opportunities to meet people in their home country and establish or maintain long-term ties of friendship or relationships and increases their chances of making friends and partnerships in the new country. If they are workers who already have partnerships and children, long distances between the primary home and the workplace challenge those relationships and may lead to higher risks of divorce or social isolation from the family. On the other hand, the social isolation of an unemployed person may be much higher – and have more serious health consequences – than the social isolation resulting from long-distance commuting. Gainful employment brings economic security as well as work-related network ties and workplace camaraderie, two aspects of linked lives that improve life quality. In any event, the EU priority of integrating Europe by dissolving borders through increasing trade, work, and educational exchanges will change the linkages of lives. To what specific degree is the subject of current and future research (Schneider and Meil 2008).

The changes in Europe that reduce the importance of national borders also include new opportunities to link lives in new ways, some of which result from or have consequences for social inequalities. As described in several places in this chapter, women in all European countries in the 21st century are more likely to work for pay than they did in the 20th century, and men's employment rates remain high. Yet the caregiving needs of children and elderly family members remain. In the absence of state-run child care and elder care or an affordable formal market option for these services, many European families look across borders for someone they can hire to do the caregiving – and housecleaning – services at rates they can afford. Lives are linked in the 21st century in Europe through the cross-border informal markets of paid service work. Women come from lower-wage countries in Eastern Europe to perform household work and caregiving in higher-wage countries, usually for cash, and usually off the books (Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2004; Hochschild 2001). Men from lower-wage countries come to higher-wage countries to work as day laborers or to establish informal businesses. The consequences for families left behind in the lower-wage countries are mixed. The additional income in the family is in many cases essential to provide for food, clothing, and educational chances. But the absence of family members for long periods of time can affect the cohesion of the family. As lives are newly linked through cross-border interaction, lives within countries and families are altered.

Other chapters in this volume that are likely to use the concept of linked lives are association and community, family and household, identity, well-being, and inequality.

13.2.3 Context – Lives in Time and Place

There are more influences on an individual's life than only his or her own goals and abilities and the lives of those in close social proximity. The life course perspective considers *context* as a third important principle. Important contexts for individual development and outcomes include historical, social, and demographic settings as well as their changes over time.

The decline in the relevance of national borders in Europe is a recent historic influence on life courses. Economic markets have changed with deregulation and privatization and with the presence of the Euro since 2002. Information and Communication Technology advances have altered the context in which relationships are formed and sustained. The Bologna Process attempts to create common ground in higher education in Europe. Pressures are higher for young people to work internships or study abroad. These components are setting a dynamic context within which individuals are managing their lives in new ways (Blossfeld et al. 2005; Blossfeld, 2006 and Blossfeld et al. 2006a; 2006b; Hofmeister).

Another important recent historical event for Europe and the world, with large consequences for the individual's historical context, is the fall of the Iron Curtain. Many life courses were drastically altered by this event. Opportunity structures have changed. Some things that were once taken for granted, like secure employment and access to health care, are no longer available for as many workers. Other things that were once very difficult, like access to information, cross-border travel, and establishing businesses, are much more possible for a greater proportion of the population.

Another example of changing context, one that is more social than political, is the acceptance of cohabitation. Cohabitation was not always widely accepted across Europe (Blossfeld 1995). As recently as the early 1960s, young people in Europe (as well as North America) had to marry in order to be legitimately permitted a sexual relationship, cohabitation, or parenthood. Non-marital cohabitation was even not particularly common in Sweden, a country where cohabitation has old roots. The primary cohabitors were older divorced and widowed people who might lose their alimony or pension if they remarried (Nazio and Blossfeld 2003). The historical context has changed, and cohabitation is widely practiced across all of central and northern Europe (though rates still lag behind in Italy).

Geographic context is also enormously important for shaping lives. Natural and built physical environments and infrastructures also influence individuals' life courses. Proximity to universities, employment possibilities, ports, and international airports, to give a few examples, can have imaginable effects on the shape of an individual's life course.

Using the example of part-time work and paid employment for women, attitudes toward women's employment and the rates of women's employment vary drastically across Europe from South to North. The European Union (EU) Labour Force Survey consistently shows that voluntary and involuntary part-time work varies by country. Employers in Italy, Greece, and France regard part-time workers as an unattractive disruption of normal production processes and workplace discipline, and so these countries have comparatively few part-time workers. Employers in Britain, by contrast, created a large permanent part-time workforce long before economic recession stimulated deregulation of labor contracts in most industrial economies in the 1980s and 1990s. The part-time workers of Sweden work enough hours to be classified as full-timers by the European Commission, while the short hours of many part-time workers in the Netherlands, Britain, and West Germany means that the European Commission would rather classify them as marginal workers (Blossfeld & Hakim 1997a: 1). Demand for service workers and the increasing levels education of

women interacted with different country contexts to produce different levels of women's full-time and part-time work in different countries between the mid-1950s and late 1970s (Blossfeld and Hakim 1997a).

To use another example of the impact of geographic location on the life course, today in Europe, many young people cohabit before or instead of marrying. But the trend in cohabitation varies by national context. Countries differ in the conditions that allow cohabitation. For example, is there affordable housing to live alone or in a partnership? In Spain and Italy, it's harder to find or afford an apartment compared to Sweden or Germany. Can one get legal and/or social permission to live together without being married? Is it socially acceptable or desirable to live with parents into adulthood? In Italy and Spain, adults often live with their parents; it's a normal arrangement, but in Northern Europe, this practice is more unusual. These geographically and politically rooted structures set incentives for individuals to make different choices in the life course (Lesthaeghe and Meekers 1986; Nazio and Blossfeld 2003).

In Northern Europe, cohabitation has replaced marriage for many couples. In Central Europe, for example, Germany and the Netherlands, cohabitation precedes rather than replaces marriage: couples tend to marry when they have a child together (Blossfeld & Mills, 2001; Huinik & Röhler, 2005; Nazio & Blossfeld, 2003). But in Southern Europe, cohabitation is still rare, typically only found among urbanites or, in Italy, in the urban North: "Among the youngest birth cohorts, about 50 percent of women in West Germany and about 40 percent in East Germany have adopted cohabitation before they eventually start a first marriage. In contrast, in Italy even among the youngest birth cohorts not more than about 10 percent of women have adopted cohabitation before eventually entering into first marriage" (Nazio and Blossfeld 2003: 31).

Context describes not just geographic circumstances. Context also refers to the personal circumstances of men's and women's lives. Education, ethnicity, marital status, family size, and biological age all have impacts on the way a life unfolds. Gender, meaning the way one conducts oneself socially as a male or female person in the world, is a very important context that affects the life course and reflects historical circumstances as well as physiological differences (Moen 1995). For example, at earlier historical times, women were not allowed to get higher education, to own property, or to continue with paid employment after marriage; men were forced into military service. And women's lives vary from men's due to the physiological difference that men cannot give birth or lactate. Even today, whether a person has a part-time job or not is situated within a gender context. The typical part-time worker will be female in every country of Europe, as can be seen in Fig. 13.4. Most part-time jobs are in service-sector industries and are lower-paid and less prestigious than full-time work (Blossfeld and Hakim 1997b). Thus women are more likely to work in service-sector industries and receive lower pay and less prestige in their work compared to men. In former socialist countries, women are also more likely than men to be unemployed.

Contexts that change, such as historical time, geographic location, and biological age, interact with contexts that do not change or change more rarely, such as nationality, ethnicity, and gender. Thus who a person is and what he or she is able to do is influenced by the interaction of various contexts. Examples abound. Many job positions and elected positions have minimum or maximum age restrictions; some have nationality restrictions as well. At a different historical time, one could marry in Europe at the age of 12 or 14; that is not generally true at the start of the 21st century. In some national contexts, such as the United States and Canada, it is possible to return to education at any age, but in others with strong age norms for education, such as Germany, returning to education in

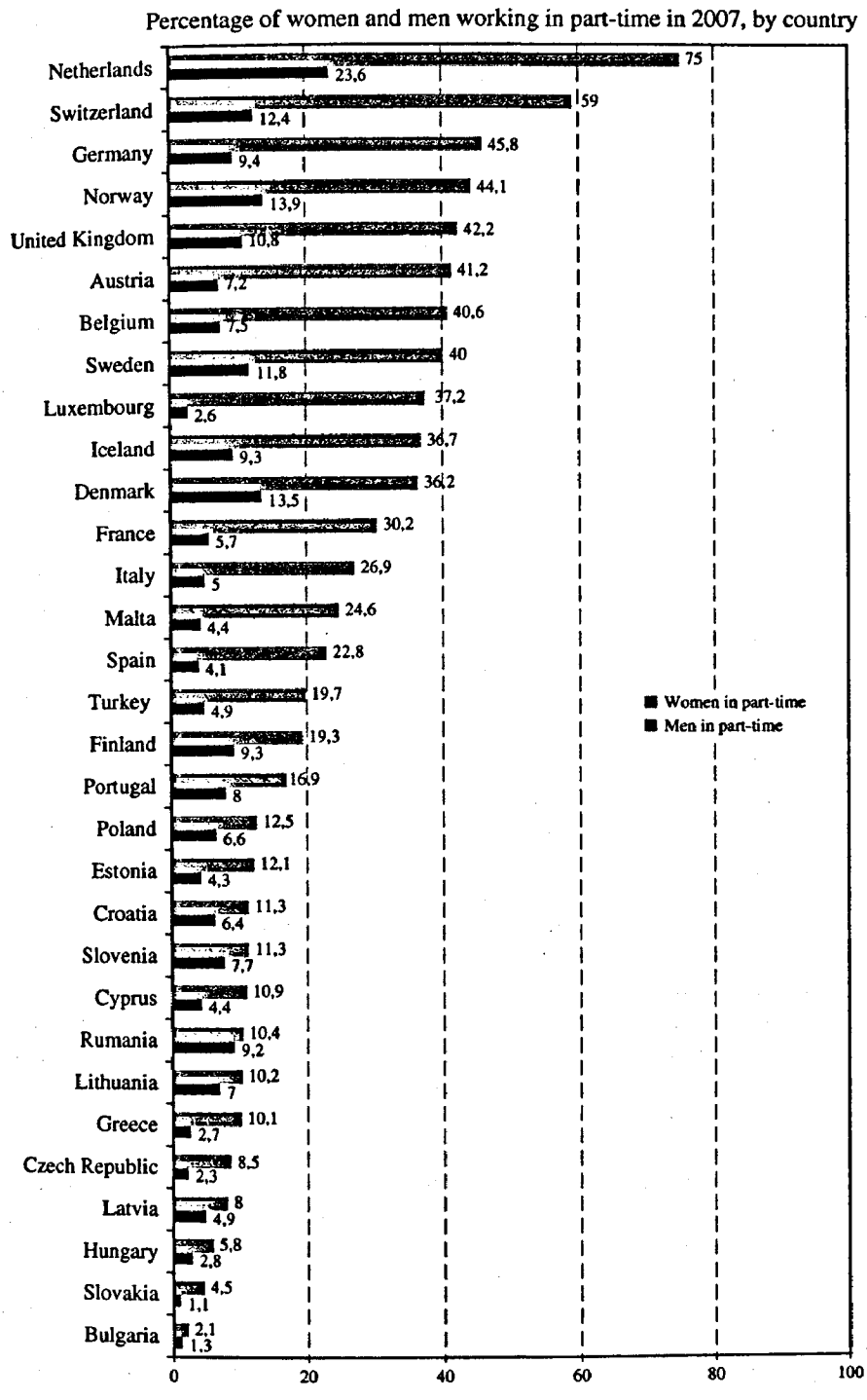

Fig. 13.4 Percentage of employed women and men in part-time (at least 1 hour per week) in 2007 in Europe, as percent of total employed, divided by country. No data available for Ireland
Source: Eurostat, online database: http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu, extraction: 26.03.2009

later life is more difficult. Some national contexts require military service of young people. Sometimes the requirement applies only to men, as in Germany, and sometimes it applies to men and women, as in Israel. The impact on the life course is obvious not only in the delay of other events such as educational completion or paid employment and in the skills acquired through the mandatory service but also, in some contexts such as Israel, the marriage market that the military creates. In other words, in Israel many young people meet their first partner because of their military service.

This volume has several chapters that address the influence of context on lives. These include association and community, bureaucracy and the state, city, culture, collective action, educational context and institutions, elites and power structure, family and household, ethnicity, gender, leisure, population, religion, stratification and social mobility, social security, and inequality.

13.2.4 Timing

The fourth principle of the life course perspective is timing. This principle has at least two dimensions: on the one hand, it refers to the sequencing and duration of events within a given life (Giele and Elder 1998b). But timing also describes the placement of a given life and the age of the individual within a specific historical context.

Through this second meaning, context is inextricably tied to timing. Every context is time-dependent: each set of characteristics a person has is influenced by the historical time in which those characteristics are converging for their impact on the individual life. For example, being a certain race or ethnicity has mattered for life outcomes differently at different historical moments, as well as in different places. Contexts change over historical time. The intersection of these historical changes with an individual's biological and social age is what lends those historical times their impact. Momentous events – economic depression, war, political transformation such as the fall of the Iron Curtain – shape life courses, but the ways in which these effects are felt are likely to vary by the age of the individuals at the time of the event. That means that each birth cohort – a group of people born around the same time – is marked by the historical events that coincide with the age at which those events happened (Elder et al. 1994). For example, the fall of the Iron Curtain has affected people very differently based on whether they were young children at the time, or teenagers, or young adults, or mid-life adults, or seniors. People who were well-established in their careers under socialism have had a difficult adjustment to the market economy, whereas people who were young children at the time of the fall of the Iron Curtain find it normal to compete for employment contracts upon reaching adulthood. The Great Depression in the United States in the 1930s impacted children differently depending on their age. Those who were teenagers at the time felt responsible to assist with family finances and began lifelong habits of frugality and concern about resources, whereas those who were young children during the Depression did not develop the same sense of urgency about money and security (Elder 1995). Generations of women have had fewer potential marriage partners because of losses of young men who served as soldiers in wartime. The cohorts of women who were young adults during World Wars I and II, for example, were more likely to remain unmarried and/or childless or to be single parents than adjacent cohorts of women. They are also more likely to have experienced violence or the threat of violence because of invasions and occupations by troops (Griffin and Braidotti 2002).

Timing describes the interaction of a person's biological age with an opportunity structure such as the expansion or contraction of the educational system or the labor market.

Whether an individual's own life chances or situation remains stable during changes that happen in the world, or whether the individual's own experiences also change because of outside events are very important outcomes of the timing principle of the life course perspective.

There are several important definitions within the principle of timing: role, role sequence, role trajectory, role transition, and process. I now describe them so that the principle becomes clearer.

13.2.4.1 Role

To understand the way timing affects life courses, it is important first to understand the concept of role. A role is a social position in relationship to another person or to an institution. A person has the role of a child to his or her parent —*parent* and *child* are both roles, with specific expectations, responsibilities, and characteristics that are widely understood as meaningful. Being a *spouse* is a role, with specific expectations. *Student* and *teacher* have specific roles in relationship to each other and to the institution of the school and the broader education system. The meanings of these roles are socially understood. Each individual is likely to have many roles in a lifetime and to have multiple roles even at the same time.

Some of the roles available to individuals vary by national context. The role of housewife, for example, was not available in socialist countries before the fall of the Iron Curtain because full employment was required of all adults, men and women. The role of paid worker was and is not available to many in specific national contexts: for example, a legal mandatory retirement age forces people to give up their paid employment role when they reach that age. Some countries even set the retirement age differently for men and women, requiring women to retire earlier than men, even though women generally live longer than men. Through such policies, the country communicates that it expects men to have a stronger and longer role as the employed worker compared to women. The role of soldier, or volunteer, or employer, is available only under specific conditions in some countries. To use a familiar example from Germany, military service is required of young men, not young women, but young men can choose an alternative "civilian service" instead of military service. Should young women also take on the role of serving in the military or in the civilian service role? This debate is not yet resolved. One consequence of German men's serving in the military or civilian service and not women is that German men then enter the role of student in universities 1 year later than women do. Assuming studies take a uniform length of time, this means that German women also finish university studies when they are 1 year younger than their male classmates and enter the labor market 1 year younger.

Timing refers in part to "the incidence, duration, and sequence of *roles* throughout the life course" (Moen et al. 1992, 1995). For example, one can imagine that a person who experiences his or her parents' deaths when he or she is age 5 will likely have a very different experience of that loss and consequently a different life compared to a person who experiences the same event when he or she is age 55. One key reason for the difference in the timing of role events is whether the person has alternative roles for self-identity. A young child has few other social roles and is primarily defined in society through its relationship to, and dependence on, parents. This example gives an idea about how the timing of roles and the loss of roles may affect the life course. In another example, someone who takes on the role of a parent has a different life course than someone who never becomes a parent. Or, a student at age 20 who drops out of university, before he or she

has a job or a family, experiences a different kind of loss than a student who drops out at age 40, who is already working a full-time job and raising a family. The person with more alternative roles will experience the loss of one role as less dramatic than the person with few alternative roles.

The role of student is an interesting example. In Great Britain, a student can be finished with university by age 21 or 22. In Germany, the role of student lasts much longer – often until the late 20s. Thus the timing of post-university employment varies greatly across Europe. A 27-year-old in Great Britain may have 5 years of full-time work experience already or even a doctoral degree and a few years of teaching experience at a university. A 27-year-old in Germany may not yet be finished with the first university degree at the same time point. As Europe becomes more integrated, expectations of what roles are normal at which biological age may change. The 27-year-old student in Germany or the 17-year-old student in Great Britain may feel out of place in the broader European context.

13.2.4.2 Role Sequence

The exact order in which an individual occupies roles is called a role sequence. Some role sequences are logically prescribed: one must be a student before one can be a teacher. One must be a parent before one can be a grandparent. One must (usually) be an income-earner before one can be a pension-earner. Other role sequences can vary. Whether or not one is married before becoming a parent or starts employment before finishing education are examples of specific role sequences that vary across Europe and over time. Role sequences impact the life course in major ways, which I discuss more at length in the next section.

Role sequences are strongly nation-dependent. Some countries expect students to be full-time without alternative employment – a role sequence of first student, then worker – while other countries allow students to take part in studies part-time while doing full-time employment. Few universities in southern and central Europe have child care services for students. The institution of university therefore expects that the role sequence in these countries is first to study, then to become a parent.

13.2.4.3 Role Trajectory

Roles are social positions, as described above. Over time, these change. Sometimes roles change because of the way earlier roles are experienced. For example, the chances for employment depend in part in success at the role of student. A role trajectory is the series of roles that an individual has, the duration of those roles, and the concurrence or overlap of roles. The difference between a role trajectory and a role sequence is that the sequence describes the ordering of the roles, and the trajectory describes not only the ordering but also the duration in the roles. Role trajectories represent the way events link together throughout an entire lifespan. Trajectories have important consequences. The life course is very different for individuals who first get a job, then marry, then have children (taking on the roles of employee, spouse, and parent in this order, which is a strongly normative role sequence) compared to individuals who have children before marrying or having a paid job (first taking on the role of parent, then spouse or employee). The concept of role trajectory includes an acknowledgement that early life decisions and experiences have later-life implications and those implications in later life have consequences for future generations (Moen 1997). For example, several studies find that in Germany, women who enter the role of parent are more likely to leave the role of employee than women who do not enter the role of parent (Blossfeld 1995; Grunow et al. 2006). And the longer women in nearly

all European and north American countries stay away from the role of employee, the less likely they are to become employees again (Blossfeld and Hofmeister 2006).

Event histories are an important way to describe role trajectories. An event history is literally a "history of events" – the collection of events, in their chronological order and duration, that have happened to a person across that person's life. Event histories are marked by particular events called role transitions, which I describe next.

13.2.4.4 Role Transition

The movement from one role to another is called a role transition. One example is the transition from single to married through the event of marriage. In the transition from non-parent to parent, the event that creates the role transition is the birth or adoption of a child (or the marriage or partnership to someone who already has a child). Role transitions are so central to the life course perspective that some scholars even define the life course as "a socially defined and institutionally regulated sequence of transitions" (Heinz 1996: 52).

It is true that the transitions from one role to another are often regulated or managed by institutions or social definitions. Consider the education system. Does the transition to "pupil" or "student" become regulated by the education system? Certainly. There are laws governing the age at which a child must be enrolled in school in most European countries. Is the transition out of the role of pupil regulated also by the institution? Yes – after a certain number of years of study with a certain rate of success, a student is released, sometimes directly to the institution of the labor market, with a credential that this institution finds valuable (Shavit and Blossfeld 1993). After a certain number of years studying without success, some education systems deny students the chance to continue. The government regulates marriage roles and transitions as well, deciding that young children shall not be allowed to make the role transition to spouse (through a minimum legal age for marriage) and that individuals who are already married cannot marry another person until that first marriage is legally ended through divorce. Sometimes there are even required waiting periods between marriage-related role transitions such as between separated and divorced statuses and between divorced and remarried statuses. The institution of family regulates some role transitions. In many families, it is unacceptable for a family member to have a child before being married, or to live together in a consensual union before marriage, or to begin working for pay before leaving the educational institution, for example. The national context influences family norms, too. In Italy and Spain, for example, living together without being married is not as accepted a lifestyle as in Sweden and Denmark, where non-married cohabiting partnerships are common and accepted.

13.2.4.5 Process

Process is a series of role transitions (Moen 1995; Moen et al. 1992, 1995). Some roles are abandoned over the life course, others are entered. The role of parent is entered when a first child is born. The role of employee is entered when one gets a job and left when one leaves the job. Someone takes on the role of brother or sister when the first sibling is born. Process is the particular chain of roles and their overlap over the life course. The combination of process and timing lead to a picture of a life: what roles one has and does not have at a given point are defining that life. Some roles are more challenging to maintain simultaneously than others, but also depending on the cultural and political context. For example, being the primary caregiver (for one or more aging parents, persons with severe disabilities, or small children) combined also with being full-time employed. The logics of the ideal worker

(regular availability) and ideal caregiver (unpredictable time demands) are not compatible (Williams, 2000). Where work and family policies – such as limitations on work hours combined with state-provided or subsidized care – allow these roles to be combined more easily, such as in Scandinavia, more people will combine the roles. Other roles are not inconsistent and can be held at the same time: one can easily be a brother or sister while being someone's child, for example. Being retired from paid work and being a grandparent fit together well. Many people are workers and spouses at the same time. Many men are workers and parents at the same time, and in fact part of the social definition of the good father role is the good provider role. This last example highlights again the importance of the gender and national context in evaluating which roles are socially constructed to be compatible.

Aging is also a process. The biological organism of the human body changes over time, as well as the social meaning of the biological age. Not only external signs of aging but also internal developmental processes of maturity continue throughout life, into old age (Bronfenbrenner 1997; Elder 1995; Moen 1997). Life course scholars study aging as more than just biological aging. Biological aging is an important context; for example, the ability to conceive children, or loss of memory, affects the life course. But social age is also important for understanding which life course decisions and directions are taken. What age do others believe is too old or too young to become a parent? What age is appropriate to continue or exit paid employment, regardless of how fit one feels? To study at University? To get new job training? To get married? Many people direct their life courses according to social age norms (Settersten and Hagestad, 1996). Whether there is a singular social age norm for family transitions in Europe, or one is developing, as asserted by Hartmut Kaelble (1997), will require more historical perspective and/or a clear reference point outside of Europe. What troubles me about saying that Europe has one norm set for family transitions is that it ignores strong national differences within Europe. For example, from Figures 13.2 and 13.3, between Sweden and Lithuania at the extremes, there are 5–7 years of difference in the average age at first marriage, and though the age is rising in all European countries, the gap of 5 years for men, 7 years for women, also remains. Looking for European convergence in age norms also risks overlooking important differences within nations. Educational levels create large differences in the norms for partnership and parenting. For those with less education, marriage or parenthood around age 30 seems late, but for those with more education, age 30 or later is right on time. It's a matter of perspective. With rising levels of education and rising levels of labor market uncertainty, the trend is likely to be toward later ages at marriage and childbirth throughout Europe, but national policies play an influential role and create differences in these trends. Even the biological boundaries are being pushed by science so that becoming a first-time parent in the early 40s is not as unusual as it once was.

13.3 Life Course Studies in Contemporary Europe

Each life course is unique, but patterns emerge from examining multiple life courses. Do the commonalities of historical time and geographic continent create similarities within European life courses so much so that one may speak of a "European Life Course"? I will try to answer this question in the sections below by illustrating the concepts of the life course perspective using examples from real studies of European life courses conducted between 1995 and 2006. These studies cover a variety of topics, some of which

overlap with other chapters in this volume. Comparing the information in this chapter with that in other chapters of this volume will illustrate more about the difference the life course perspective can make in our understanding about individuals in their social contexts.

13.3.1 Transitions from Youth to Adulthood

Young people experience many different role transitions as they age into adulthood. In fact, the very distinctions between youth and of adulthood are organized around various important role transitions that tend to be correlated with biological age, but not perfectly. Individuals leave the strict regulation of the educational system and venture out into less strictly age-regulated domains. These include exit from the parental home, exit from the educational system, entry into the paid labor market, entry to homeownership, entry into a partnership, and entry into the role of parent. An individual who has some or all of these transitions is often considered an adult, and individuals without any of these transitions are generally considered to be behaving youthfully (the degree to which people perceive a mismatch between social age and biological age on these dimensions depends on the national context). In formulating ideas about adulthood, biological age is only one of several criteria.

How are these transitions influenced by the historical context? Are there massive changes in societies that are influencing the timing of entry into these adult roles? A recent volume, *Globalization, Uncertainty, and Youth in Society*, investigated young people's transitions to first job, first partnership, and first parenthood in 14 countries across Europe and North America in the last decades of the 20th century (Blossfeld et al. 2005).

The utility of the life course perspective is obvious when one considers the multiple and complex influences on a young person as he or she tries to make his or her way into the labor market, the marriage market, and into the role of parent. I now describe how the components of the life course perspective – human agency, linked lives, context, and timing – help explain how young people's lives have changed in Europe.

Context mediates the effects of human agency. Despite the fact that youth with more education tended to avoid unemployment more easily than youth with less education in most of Europe, the story was the opposite in Italy and Spain. Youth with high education in Italy and Spain had to strategize and in many cases wait a long time to get their first job until it was a "good enough" job or else they risked being trapped in a lower-level job than their education would justify. Italy and Spain are two national contexts where the labor market is organized into "insiders" and "outsiders." Once inside the labor market, workers are strongly protected from job loss. But before getting in, new workers experience insecurity in the labor market: whether they can find jobs, how long they can keep their jobs, whether they will be allowed to work enough hours to earn enough, or whether they get vacation time, sick pay, or pension payments. Context is also clear from the Irish case, where Ireland experienced a drastic improvement in its economy in the last decades of the 20th century relative to previous conditions. This change helped young people find work and establish families at earlier ages than previous generations had been able to do (Mills et al. 2005).

The issue of timing is also clearly manifested in the lives of European youth. Those who aged into adulthood later in the 20th century were more affected by economic uncertainties than those who transitioned to adulthood in earlier decades. Timing within lives is also important. Marriage was an important prerequisite for having a child in central and

southern European countries. Leaving school was an important step before forming a partnership or becoming a parent in all countries.

The principle of linked lives manifests itself in the study of youth in several ways. Youth who stay home until finding a job or getting married, even when this may take years, can do so only through the support of their parents. In these cases, the lives of youth are clearly linked to their parents' ability and willingness to support them. In the transition to parenthood, linked lives are also highly relevant. Not only do most young people become parents only after they first create a stable partnership, but also the financial situation of the partner plays a role in whether the couple will become parents. In countries where male employment is generally privileged through cultural expectations and support, preferential hires and promotions of men, and tax advantages to single-earner households (such as in Germany, Italy, Spain, and the Netherlands), men and women cope with the labor market uncertainty in very different ways in comparison to the youth in countries with more support for female employment such as Sweden, Norway, Canada, and the United States. In those societies that prioritize men's careers, women with low career chances and high rates of uncertainty in their labor market entry chances were more likely to become parents than women with better career chances and more likely than their male peers with similar disadvantages. In those same countries, men who had better labor market chances were more likely to become parents than men who did not. The linked lives aspect explains the opposite effects of gender – the interdependence of the partnership in these societies means that a woman relies on an earner to support her once she is a parent, rather than herself parenting and earning a living at the same time. Likewise, a man who has better earning chances also has a higher likelihood of forming a partnership with a caregiver for his children, enabling him to remain employed while being a parent. By contrast, women with high levels of education and strong career chances postpone parenthood in countries where careers and parenthood are structurally incompatible.

A different study of young people shows another aspect of linked lives. In their comparison of the rates of transition to cohabitation over time and across three national contexts, Nazio and Blossfeld (2003) find that the actions of the peer group, rather than the earlier generation, are more important for influencing young couples to live together without marrying first (Nazio and Blossfeld 2003).

Is there convergence or divergence of youth's transition experiences? On the one hand, one can say that there is some *similarity* of youth experience in Europe because youth have become more vulnerable to uncertainty across all countries except Ireland: later-born cohorts have more fixed-term contracts, more part-time work, more irregular work hours, and lower occupational chances than earlier cohorts did. That means that youth throughout Europe, and also North America, are having more difficulties entering the labor market than previous generations did, with the exception of Ireland.

But the story is more complicated than that, and, with a closer look, divergence is probably a better description. Depending on many things – the social structure; the policies that organize social assistance, education, labor market regulations; the employment structure; cultural norms of tolerance for security and insecurity; the chances of women relative to men on the labor market; the sense of relative privilege or deprivation compared to previous generations; religious and family priorities; the tolerance of the previous generation for having adult children remain at home – the lives of young people in Europe are organized very differently. Some find employment immediately after leaving education. Some experience on-the-job training; others learn job skills within the education system. Some must wait until an economic upturn before securing employment. Some wait until their jobs are secure before forming a partnership. Some wait until their jobs are secure before having

children. Some wait until they have a marriage before having children. Some don't wait for anything before having children because parenthood is the only realistic role identity available. Some never are able to organize any of these transitions, or do not wish to. Both the realities of the level of uncertainty and the options available to cope vary across Europe.

13.3.2 Women's Employment in the Middle of the Life Course

Women in Europe have diverse life courses. Their experiences vary based on contextual personal and national characteristics and historical time. Recent work compiled in the volume *Globalization, Uncertainty, and Women's Careers* illustrates the components of the life course perspective through multiple studies of women in 13 countries, 11 in Europe, in the last half of the 20th century (Blossfeld and Hofmeister 2006).

The liberalization of the labor market is expected to have an impact on women's careers in Europe. As employers try to respond to increasing competition, they seek flexible workforces. "Flexibilizing" measures – short-term contracts, part-time work, irregular work hours, and fewer benefits – tend not to accrue to insiders in the labor market, who are protected by legislation and the employers' interests in retaining at least a portion of their labor force as loyal and secure. Insiders have historically been mid-life men. Instead, uncertainties are shifted to outsiders, oftentimes youth who lack tenure and women who return to the labor market after having exited for care-giving. We find that women across many national contexts were indeed experiencing reduced employment chances under conditions of economic liberalization, including in Germany, Spain, the United States, Italy, the UK, Estonia, and the Czech Republic. But the apparent convergence of women's life courses toward rising uncertainty masks important divergences of experience. I describe these now using the principles of the life course perspective.

Human agency organizes the impact of uncertainty on women's careers. Women with more education are generally more shielded from unemployment and job quality reductions than those with less education. In addition, career-oriented women who avoid becoming parents are more likely to keep their labor market positions than women who exit for parenthood and try to re-enter later.

Women's linked lives with other people have an enormous influence on their careers. As stated above, the effect of children on women's life courses is drastic. Women who have children often experience the end of their employment, though this is shaped by context. Mothers who try to re-enter employment after some years are heavily penalized in some countries with either difficulty finding employment or employment that is below their previous level (Hofmeister and Blossfeld 2006).

Women's relationships to men influence their employment in two ways. On the one hand, women across successive birth cohorts are less and less likely to exit employment when they marry. On the other hand, the employment status of the husband is often an important reference for the wife's own career and the necessity of her own earnings. Women with unemployed husbands sometimes become the primary breadwinner themselves. In other cases, they themselves are also in similar disadvantage in the labor market, because of marital homogamy (the tendency to marry someone with similar skills or background) and experience disproportionately more unemployment themselves (Plomien 2006).

Context is highly relevant for women's careers. National contexts shape chances. Sweden and Denmark tend to protect mothers' employment and offer a large public sector

of employment (Grunow and Leth-Sørensen 2006; Korpi and Stern 2006). Here, the rising insecurity experienced by other women on the European continent is not felt so drastically. In Germany, women experience much more uncertainty to the point where even higher education fails to protect women from unemployment and downward job mobility (Buchholz and Grunow 2006). Women in Spain and Italy experience the conflict between full-time employment and care-giving (Pisati and Schizzerotto 2006; Simó Noguera 2006). This conflict is enhanced by the expectation in the society for maternal care-giving.

Timing plays an enormous role in predicting women's career outcomes. The longer a woman is in the same job, the less likely she is to move out of it – into either better or worse positions (Hofmeister and Blossfeld 2006). Shorter durations in care-giving or other kinds of exits lower the chance of unemployment or coming back to a reduced-quality job, and longer durations have the opposite effect. The timing of births within a woman's employment trajectory matter, because women who have a first birth quickly after starting a job are less likely to get that job back when they wish to return.

Historical context and timing are very important for women's careers, particularly in the post-socialist countries. Young women's career chances varied across the 1990s as the economies in these countries transitioned from command-style to capitalism (Bukodi and Robert 2006a; Hamplová 2006; Helemäe and Saar 2006; Plomien 2006). The shift from required full-time employment of women to the stark choices available between unemployment or full-time employment coincided with a withdrawal of state-provided child care support and new competition for work in a new kind of labor market. Maternity leave may be increasingly insecure as these countries face economic pressures and expenses in the process of modernizing their economies and infrastructures. Part-time employment is rarely available, though desirable, but the financial demands of households often require two full-time incomes. In a cultural context where a woman's place was in the home at the same time that the law required her full-time paid labor in the former socialist countries (resulting in a phenomenally taxing double burden), it is little surprise that gender attitudes have moved back toward a male-breadwinner–female-homemaker preference in these countries since the collapse of socialism; such an attitude is a luxury to idealize, even if the constraints of the market do not permit its expression in reality.

There are distinct variations among modern countries in terms of the importance of not only labor market agreements but also the availability of state-sponsored family supports or market-driven alternatives to women's unpaid care, all of which impact on the mid-life options and pathways of women tremendously (Esping-Andersen 1999; Orloff 2002). In some countries spells of unemployment tend to be short (Sweden, Denmark) and expansion of the public and service sectors greatly enhances women's employment opportunities despite fluctuations in the national economy (Grunow and Leth-Sørensen 2006; Korpi and Stern 2006). These nations share a social-democratic welfare regime philosophy that impacts women's life courses. In other countries (Italy, Spain, Germany), the lack of provisions for women's care-giving means women make choices between paid work and family: they reduce the number of children or avoid them altogether if they are committed to careers (Simo Noguera 2006; Pisati and Schizzerotto 2006; Buchholz and Grunow 2006). This trend also follows welfare regime logics.

Countries with few protections and a laissez-faire social policy regarding female and child poverty tend to leave poor women in the position of seeking informal solutions to childcare and accepting jobs almost regardless of the levels of constraints or the low quality of the position (United States, Estonia) (Hofmeister 2006; Helemäe and Saar 2006). British women are more vulnerable to unemployment when they have flexible, short-term, fixed-term, and marginal work (Golsch 2006b). But a means-tested benefit system and

flat-rate entitlements in Britain may contribute to a lack of incentive for either partner in poor households to seek employment. Women living in countries undergoing large-scale economic reforms such as the former socialist countries are the most vulnerable with the most potential to gain and lose (Hofmeister and Blossfeld 2006).

Flexible work remains marginalizing – that is, it does not lead to promotion and salary raises and is vulnerable to economic downturns. As this form of work expands and is filled primarily by women, the employment and career uncertainty of women in nearly all countries rises (Germany, Hungary, Estonia, Czech Republic, Poland, Britain, United States, Mexico, Italy, and Spain) or in the best case remains stable (the Netherlands, Sweden, and Denmark) (Hofmeister and Blossfeld 2006).

Qualitative interviews of the European Union project FEMAGE showed that migrant and native women in some areas have the same problems because of gender, for example, labor market disadvantages, a lack of child care, and underfunded pension systems (Backes 1993; FEMAGE 2008). In its international comparative analysis of nine countries, the study finds that migrant women have to face additional challenges beyond those of native-born women, for example, adjusting their culturally formed gender roles and expectations. This adjustment, together with the lack of family support system, leads migrant women to postpone their child-bearing. Again through this example, we see the influence of timing on life course outcomes. Some women may even decide to stay childless. A lack of social integration is an additional risk if their native language is different from the language of their resident country.

13.3.3 Men's Employment in the Middle of the Life Course

In the same historical times, in the same national contexts, what happens when one changes just one context of the life course – the gender context? What happens to men's careers, in comparison to women's, under conditions of economic liberalization?

The experience of European men in the labor market in mid-life is generally different from that of European women, a fact that points to the importance of the gender context of life courses. Because men have been traditionally responsible for the earnings of their families, their focus has tended to be on their labor market achievement throughout their lives. By mid-life, their life courses are marked by the early decisions to choose specific majors of study and trades of specialization that will earn well and provide reliable employment, to work continuously instead of taking interruptions for care-giving, and to seek promotions, sometimes at the expense of personal or family time. Employers have tended to organize their work forces around protecting their loyal mid-life male workers (Mills and Blossfeld 2006). The protections of this group come at a cost to other groups who are less protected, as described above. But even among men, the life course is not fully converged across European contexts, and important differences reveal themselves depending upon men's human agency, linked lives, context, and timing, as I illustrate with results from the volume *Globalization, Uncertainty, and Men's Careers* (Blossfeld et al. 2006).

Human agency has enormous influences on men's career chances. Men with more education, more job experience, or white-collar positions are generally protected in nearly all the countries studied (Mills and Blossfeld 2006). Men lacking these tend to experience long-term unemployment in all countries, a sign of the accumulation of disadvantage over the life course. The effect of a man's higher qualification level protecting him on all dimensions of job insecurity and job quality is significant and generally increasing over

time, leading to increasing inequalities of life course experiences based on men's human agency and access to educational opportunities.

National labor market context matters a great deal for men's careers. Those in an insider–outsider labor market experienced more stable careers and less downward mobility or unemployment as long as they were insiders. Men in countries with more open employment systems and fewer workplace protections experienced more turbulent careers under the influence of globalization but also shorter spells of unemployment. In short, whether men were subject to patchwork careers (frequent job changes and shorter job tenure) depended on their regional and national context. Social and political settings in Sweden, Italy, and Germany protect mid-career men from patchwork careers (Bernardi 2006; Korpi and Tåhlin 2006; Kurz et al. 2006). In Spain, a core group of men do not experience patchwork careers, but those with less human capital do (Simó Noguera et al. 2006). In Denmark, patchwork careers do not have adverse consequences because the state safety net protects men between jobs (Grunow and Leth-Sørensen 2006). Men in the Netherlands and the UK in Europe (and the United States and Mexico in North America) tend to experience rising or stable levels of patchwork careers (Mills et al. 2006; Golsch 2006b; Luijkx et al. 2006; Parrado 2006).

Historical timing had significant effects on men's employment outcomes in the post-socialist countries. Men who experienced the transition to capitalism in their later careers experienced lower job mobility, and when it did occur, it was more likely to be upward than men who were in their earlier careers at the moment when the Iron Curtain fell. These men experienced extreme turbulence and high levels of job mobility, both upward and downward. Career timing matters for many men. Longer spells in the same job mean that men are less likely to change jobs – sticking with a first job position increases the chances of being able to organize a stable long-term career (Mills and Blossfeld 2006).

In conclusion, men's mid-life career patterns do not show convergence across Europe. Rather, what had been relatively stable mid-20th century convergence of the male life course around lockstep paid labor market advancement is now diverging depending on the responsiveness of the policies and labor markets to liberalization forces. Men in different countries, with different skills and backgrounds, have very different labor market experiences. And we can even expect regional differences that result from different educational systems (Hillmert 2004) or economic opportunities. Some contexts – such as in central Europe – cement mid-life men's economic advantages and other contexts – such as the post-socialist experience – introduce new uncertainties to the male life course.

13.3.4 Retirement and Late Careers: Consequences from a Lifetime of Employment Experiences

How have later life courses been affected by the "flexibilization" of the labor market? The recent volume *Globalization, Uncertainty and Late Careers in Society* answers this question (Blossfeld et al. 2006). The modern economies of Europe require employers to change what they need and expect from employees in order to keep up with growing worldwide competition, stimulated by the historical contexts of the fall of the Iron Curtain and the rise of Asia's economies. But many European countries have worker protection laws in place that give a great amount of security to workers with seniority. These workers are less likely than younger workers to have the new knowledge-based skills needed by the emerging European labor market, and those workers are likely to be accustomed to

much higher wages than the world-wide economy would pay their competitors elsewhere. Employers have only a few options, varying by their legal context: (1) they can try to retrain their older workers with the new skills they need to be competitive; (2) they can lay off these older workers, shifting them into unemployment; (3) they can cut the wages of older workers; or (4) they can shift them into early retirement (Buchholz et al. 2006). Employers are under legal and practical constraints regarding their older workers which vary by nation and industry. Employers, employees, and nation-states are in a struggle about who should pay the high costs of supporting older workers whose productivity either does not match their expense or is assumed to be out of proportion. What are the pathways for individuals based on their own agency? How are retirement exits linked within couples? What is the response to these demands of employees and employers in various national contexts? Does timing play a role?

In many cases, individual characteristics and human agency affect the likelihood of a person leaving the role of worker. Those who have established their own businesses tend to stay in the labor market longer, both because no one is around to force them out and because there are fewer sources of payment for retirement (many states provide only minimal benefits to retired self-employed individuals). Early life events, such as educational attainment, have an influence late in the life course: those with more education are more likely to stay in the labor market longer. Another example of human agency comes in the form of personal goals and savings. In comparison to European countries, which tend to offer something in the way of retirement benefits and pensions that are high enough to support a reasonable standard of living, the economically liberal design of the United States' retirement policies means that older workers must be much more self-sufficient with personal savings and investments before they are able to retire financially (Warner and Hofmeister 2006). Is Europe moving in this direction, as pension systems struggle with an ever-higher proportion of older citizens? Incidents of labor market re-entry of already-retired individuals are higher in the United States than in most of Europe, although still not altogether common. When an American realizes he or she cannot personally afford the retirement, that person is likely to return to the labor market, a possibility that is closed to many Europeans because of age restrictions on employment and norms or policies discouraging the employment of older workers (Warner and Hofmeister 2006).

Research shows evidence of linked lives even in retirement timing. Couples often time their retirement to occur together, in cases where they are able to choose when to retire. The pattern is especially common that the wife takes retirement at the moment her husband retires, even when it is earlier than she would prefer to retire (Hofmeister and Moen 1999).

There is similarity in late career employment patterns in Europe in that older workers are less and less likely to participate in the paid labor market across historical time. This pattern is true also in North America. But there is a lack of convergence as to the precise timing of the employment exit and the pathway to that employment exit. Different nation-states and firms solve the dilemma of reconciling older workers with modern economies in a variety of ways, tending in two different directions (Blossfeld et al. 2006a).

Firms and/or governments are increasingly offering pension incentives that encourage older workers to leave the paid labor market: an *employment exit strategy*. Older workers in Italy, Spain, Germany, and the Netherlands have tended to experience rising opportunities for early retirement over time (Beckstette et al. 2006; Bernardi and Garrido 2006; Buchholz 2006; Henkens and Kalmijn 2006). By the end of the study period (1990s), the rates of labor market participation of men aged 60–64 was between 20 and 40% in these countries.

Older workers in the United Kingdom, by contrast, are more likely to be required to adapt their skills to the demands of the labor market in a market-induced *maintenance*

strategy (Golsch et al. 2006). They have the opportunities to learn new skills on the job and experience less age discrimination in getting hired, but they also have also less financial security offered by the state, which increases their need to stay employed. Older workers in the United States have a similar experience (Warner and Hofmeister 2006).

Other European workers experience a related form of maintenance strategy in the labor market: a set of public-induced maintenance strategies. Here, the government serves as a large-scale employer, acting in combination with labor market policies that encourage workers to stay in the market and offering life-long re-training opportunities for new jobs. Workers in Denmark, Sweden, and Norway experience this kind of chance (Aakvik et al. 2006; Hofäcker and Leth-Sørensen 2006; Lindquist 2006). About half of the men aged 60–64 in these countries are still in the labor market, with the exception of Denmark, which instituted special policies that created a different direction for older workers there. In Denmark, first the policies encouraged early exit, but then these expensive policies were abandoned in favor of incentives to increase older workers' presence in the labor market (Hofäcker and Leth-Sørensen 2006).

There are other contexts besides the nation-state that affect exits from the role of worker. Industry and firm-level characteristics influence job exits. Workers in traditional industries are most likely to be encouraged or forced out of employment, while workers in the public sector are likely to remain in paid work the longest. Firm size also plays a role, with larger firms more likely to encourage exits and to be more able to afford them.

Older workers in countries that directly experienced the fall of the Iron Curtain had unique experiences compared to Western Europe. Under communism, older workers stayed in the labor market relatively long and in secure positions. In Hungary, workers who were in their late forties and early fifties at the time of the breakdown of communism were most strongly forced out as the economies underwent massive transformation (Bukodi and Róbert 2006b). Many workers were able to regain some employment after the initial transition shock, and the pattern of massive early exits decreased somewhat. But overall in Hungary, Estonia, and the Czech Republic, older workers were more likely to be forced out of the labor market at younger ages after the transformation than the earlier-born cohorts who reached retirement ages before the transformation (Bukodi and Róbert 2006b; Hamplová and Pollnerová 2006; Täht and Saar 2006). The situation in Estonia is particularly acute because older workers are forced out by employers who seek flexible labor, but neither the market nor the state provides viable alternative sources of income, leaving older Estonians with severe financial problems and few solutions (Täht and Saar 2006).

The situation of increasingly early exits in all the countries studied may be likely to reverse, based on even more recent policy changes. This is an area remaining for future research.

13.4 Conclusions: Can We Speak of a European Life Course, Now or in the Future?

Is there a "European Life Course"? The answer is a question: compared to whom? Or when? Compared to residents of North America and other continents, Europeans experience life courses with similar challenges and opportunities that shape their direction. It is true that one sees also the similarities of experiences under such macro forces as economic liberalization and within particular life stages and gender contexts. Empirical comparative

work on life courses in Asia, South America, and Africa brings us further in our understanding of the "Western" or European life course. Meanwhile, national comparisons point to the myriad ways in which context and timing combine with human agency and linked lives to create diverse pathways and experiences across the life course.

Will the European Union further push life courses to converge? Are the role trajectories and sequences of Europeans likely to become more similar as broader-scale institutions continue to suggest ideal life course pathways and stigmatize alternatives? We need further life course studies to assess these questions fully. My conjecture is that the European Union will not create a convergence of life course patterns, at least not very soon. National path dependencies and traditions will continue to create unique solutions that reflect cultural and individual differences even as the nations on the continent of Europe face a shared future.

Acknowledgments The author would like to thank Julia Hahmann for important research contributions to this chapter.

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