BOOK REVIEW

Gendered life courses. Levy, R., & Widmer, E. D. 2013. Berlin: Lit Verlag Dr E Hopf.   ISBN 978-3-643-80143-2

John Bynner,
Institute of Education, London
jbynner@slls.org.uk

With the growing accessibility of large-scale longitudinal datasets and new statistical methods for analysing the event histories they contain, Life Course study has blossomed in recent years. But the exceptional growth of the whole area has also revealed some lacunae in conceptualisation. The assumption of researchers, and the policy makers who use their findings, tends to be that the trajectories, transitions and turning points through which men and women's life courses are constructed are broadly similar, if not identical, in most respects. Such neglect of gender is especially true in the years prior to, during and just after, adolescence, but is evident in some form throughout the whole of adulthood.

In their most welcome and enriching book Levy and Widmer, and colleagues from the Pavie (*parcours de vie*) Centre for the Interdisciplinary Study of Life Courses, based in the Universities of Lausanne and Geneva, set out to put the omission of gender to rights. Their focus is not just restricted to gender differentiation in prevalence across common life course trajectories, but on its interaction or, as preferred in the book, 'intersection' with other shaping influences such as social class. The research resources deployed are mainly longitudinal and cross-sectional multi-country datasets – with retrospective data to fill the gaps in the longitudinal record – particularly the Swiss Household Panel (SHP) for which annual data collection began in 1979.

While focusing on the treatment of gender in life course analysis, the book sets out to evaluate a range of theories to account for life course trajectories and statuses – the latter defined by participation, position and role. The range includes 'rational choice', 'family development/lifecycle', 'cumulative advantage and disadvantage', 'gendered 'master' statuses', 'postmodernism' and 'bounded life course pluralisation' (embracing 'de-standardization' and 'individualization'). Institutional and policy effects are pursued using the Esping-Andersen threefold classification of welfare states as a basis for cross-national comparison.

The other major theme is analytic strategy, the core of which is Andrew Abbott's 'narrative methodology' comprising the classificatory techniques of sequence analysis using optimal matching analysis methods (OMA). OMA is used to identify common trajectories within and across the major life course domains of family, occupation, employment, residence and so on. Cluster analysis then follows, to assign sample members to different combinations of 'trajectory status types'. Regression analysis (usually logistic) is then used to profile the types in terms of demographic variables such as education, socio-economic status and ethnicity. The role of gender is assessed either by including male/female as a regressor or, to gain the most complete picture of its intersection with other potential influences, by carrying out the sequence and cluster analysis for men and women separately.

The text begins with two illuminating chapters devoted to theoretical exposition and optimal matching methodology, followed by nine chapters by Centre members including the book's editors, on research findings in different areas. The three chapters following discuss the contribution of the work to methodological development. Finally there is an excellent overview chapter titled "Life Course Analysis – A field of Intersections"

The novelty of the approach is that, unlike much of the uni-dimensional trajectory analysis that typically proceeded it, involving one life course domain or sub-area at a time, the holistic nature of the life course is encompassed by mapping trajectories across two or more of them through the team's 'Multi Channel ' extension of OMA technique. Trajectory identification extends across life histories of individuals, couples and families, thereby embracing the key life course component of *linked lives.* All findings are illuminated by excellent visualisations, restricted only by the limitations of black-and-white typeface.

From this wide array of investigations, a number of key findings stand out with regard to gender. The idea that women and men's life courses are both converging and de-standardizing in response to the individualization of the life course is mistaken, but only partly.

For men, despite the slight weakening of the occupational trajectory through post-industrial and post-recession insecurities, the dominant or 'master' status of employment prevails. For women, who spend on average a substantially smaller proportion of their adult lives in paid employment, the picture is more varied. At least four types of major female employment trajectories can be distinguished: 'Full-time' (one third women compared with about three quarters men), 'Part-time', 'Returner' (after child rearing) and 'Housewife'.

Family development trajectories - 'Parental', 'Erratic, 'Conjugal' and 'Solo' - show more gender comparability, with Parental (around half) dominant for both sexes, but are becoming increasingly complicated across cohorts by family reconstruction through separation and divorce. However, the methodology is sufficiently flexible to demonstrate remarkably clear developmental patterns.

Widmer and Levy use the findings to evaluate gender disadvantage in terms of such factors as the distribution of household tasks, access to resources, residential mobility and restricted career opportunities. But they prefer to characterise this experience more as an issue of 'exclusion from participation' rather than 'inequality' in a 'positional' sense. Such exclusion is ameliorated or reinforced institutionally. Hence cross-national comparison points to the Nordic countries' superiority in addressing female disadvantage through the support given to independent living, generous maternal (and paternal) leave and publicly funded childcare.

The findings are thought-provoking and the conclusions generally convincing. The only outstanding questions that arise for me largely as pointers to future work concern limitations in methodology, data and conceptualisation.

The last of these is underpinned by a strong sociological (largely structuralist) perspective that tends to downplay the insights to be gained from others such as developmental psychology and economics. Thus Rational Choice theory, the staple of economics, is seen as failing as an explanatory tool because of its too heavy reliance on individual *agency.* Yet agency's role in life course construction, usefully conceived by psychologists as the expression of *identity,* comprises such individual (psychological)

characteristics as motivation, aspiration, efficacy, attitudes and temperament, intersecting with other self perceptions bound up with class, gender, ethnicity and so on. Though data limitations in this case may have precluded their detailed investigation, they are surely central to the inter-disciplinary understanding that Life Course Science, as espoused by such writers as Glen Elder and Walter Heinz, not to mention PAVIE, is seeking.

Methodology issues arise in relation to sample integrity and model validity. Thus, more consideration could usefully be given to the effects of missing data and especially *attrition* of sample members in the longitudinal surveys as potential sources of bias in the OMA findings. Weighing its effects and developing a common statistical adjustment strategy, including weighting and imputation, for dealing with it across the data sets used seems essential.

Another problematic feature, this time of OMA itself, is the relative fragility of trajectory identification and the typologies based on it, brought about by the essentially arbitrary decisions that the researcher has to make. These concern 'the costs' of 'substitution', 'deletion' and 'insertion of trajectory elements' to make the trajectories match, and on 'entropy' indexed by the diversity of the successive states comprising any given trajectory. Such decision rules as exist tend to rely largely on pragmatism and experience, contrasting with the sample-based probability estimates on which statistical decisions in classical multivariate analysis are based. As the authors note, *reproducibility* is a major challenge to OMA methodology and findings. Yet surprisingly there is no mention in the book's index, of such validation techniques as replication and triangulation for achieving it.

Finally, identifying the facts of communality and difference in life course trajectories is not only valuable as an aid to theory development, but as a basis for action. Although policy here is restricted to its role in explanation, in reading the book, I was repeatedly struck by the potential relevance of the findings for policy development, most obviously in relation to gender. But perhaps that's part of the agenda for the next stage of the programme and the book to follow. We eagerly look forward to it!