

Mobility, career and family lives: interrelated events in the life course. The case of new immigrants to Switzerland

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Context

The life course approach proposed by Elder (1974) put forward the understanding of social phenomenon. According to this paradigm individuals' life course is composed of different steps and transitions, which in turn build life trajectories. These transitions also depend on biologic and psychologic characteristics, as well as on the historical and social context. As a result, the different life domains, like family, work, and migration, are in constant interaction to shape the life course of each individual.

Starting from an important breakthrough by Rossi's study "Why family move" many scholars have investigated links between family events and residential mobility (Rossi 1955). The occurrence and destination of such relocations were considered by Rossi as a way to accommodate to their changing family structure and to bring their household needs to equilibrium (Wagner and Mulder 2015). Although this adjustment perspective has received many supports, a large body of today's literature challenges this relation. Opposite effects are claimed pointing to the different opportunities one can have to find a partner or an employment following a move. As a result, mobility can be a determinant as much as a result of family and professional changes. Even more concerns have been emphasized regarding the interdependency and synchronicity of such decision-making processes. Given the endogenous nature of these events that depend both on past and anticipated life events assessing causality in these domains represents important methodological challenges.

In a pioneer work Courgeau (1990) showed that migration trajectories, family and professional lives are strongly interrelated. Our paper proposes to shed new light on Courgeau's perspective by deconstructing the diverse sequences in these domains among newly arrived immigrants in Switzerland. Average effects of one event or transition on the other don't have a powerful meaning in today's context where life course transitions are less standardized. This is even more pronounced for the migrant population, which is more diverse in terms of social background. This population is expected to be more mobile due to the need for adjustment following a long-distant move (Lerch, 2012) but at the same time to face more structural constraints resulting in lower success to actualized their preferences (Turner Hedman 2014). Because of the lack of information, network support or economic resources, links between mobility and other life domains of the foreign-born population are expected to differ from those of native-born.

A large body of literature has already investigated links between mobility and family dynamics (Kulu and Milewski 2007; Aybek et al. 2015), migrations and labor force participation (Flippen and Parrado 2015), and also family trajectories and employment transitions (Pollock 2007; Bono and Weber 2012), but few contributions link them all together (Clark and Withers 2009). Importantly, heterogeneity of life course trajectories by sub-group of national/cultural background has usually been left out (Dannefer 2003).

Objectives

This paper takes on the life course approach to investigate the complex relation between housing career, family dynamics and employment transitions, following an international migration. It aims at describing the diverse settlement trajectories by distinguishing immobile individual from those whose mobility is link to family life, professional events, or both. Life course is embedded in a multi-level structure with a societal level that determines constraints and opportunities of social actions (Huinink et Kohli 2014) but also ideal path to adulthood, parenthood and retirement with preferred age-related events. A change in country of residence can be interpreted as a critical event in the life course, disrupting the succession of events related to family and professional life and altering the continuity of such biographies. One could have to re-frame her life course if social structures and institutions that previously guaranteed successions and durations of different states differ from the context in the destination country (Wingens et al. 2015). Therefore, this mobile population of international migrants is likely to experiment several transitions early after arrival due to different processes of adaptation and adjustment.

Data and method

We use a Swiss dataset recently created (Steiner and Wanner 2015) allowing for longitudinal analysis of family, professional and residential dynamics. In 2010, Switzerland has switched from traditional census data collection to a population registers system. From now on demographic information are exhaustively collected and continuously updated. This transition towards a system that has proved successful in Nordic countries was accompanied by the creation of a social security number, which allows linking different administrative data sources all together. As part of an important research project (nccr-On the move) information from the population register (international and internal migrations, birth and death, civil status) were linked to the unemployment register and social security register. From this dataset we follow for a three years period international migrants arrived in Switzerland in 2011, aged 18 to 34 years.

Using sequences of transition techniques (Gabadinho et al 2011; Bürgin and Ritschard 2014), we investigate the underlying process of different forms of intersections between family (cohabitation, marriage, children), professional (employment transitions, unemployment and inactivity episodes) and migratory transitions (long and short distance moves, internal and international migrations). We describe the diverse trajectories; the way different states succeed to each other; their occurrence and frequency. We aim at providing a typology of the multiple trajectories experienced by recent migrants and analyzing the most important characteristics associated with one trajectory or another. This longitudinal approach, which intends to cover the plurality of experience, will provide new insights on the life course of migrants.

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