Internal migration over young adult life courses: Continuities and changes across cohorts in West Germany

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\textbf{ARTICLE INFO}

Keywords:
Life course
Internal migration
Sequence analysis
Cohort comparison
West Germany

\textbf{ABSTRACT}

This study examines internal migration as part of unfolding life courses, scrutinizing stability and change across socio-historical contexts from post-war Germany. We inquire whether the structure of family and labour market life courses intersect with migration experience in early adult ages for men and women born around 1939–41, 1949–51, 1964 and 1971. We then establish how recent changes in the transition to adulthood are reflected in the life courses of internal migrants. We accomplish this using exploratory mining of event histories on retrospective monthly records of life events occurring between ages 16 and 30 from the West German samples of the German Life History Study.

Our descriptive analyses reveal that the structure of young adults’ life courses intersects with internal migration experience. Differences in the life courses of movers and stayers have increased across socio-historical periods, and are more apparent in the labour market trajectory than in the family trajectory. Diversity in internal migrants’ trajectories reflect the complex ways in which young adults negotiate life courses, and align with the generalized protraction of school-to-work transitions and the delay of family projects. Our research adds to recent studies that underline the value of situating migration events in the wider biographical and structural contexts. Findings contribute to map in efficient ways the full complexity of individual life courses.

1. Introduction

Migration (within countries) is a major life course process by which individuals adapt their location to changes in life circumstances (Bailey, 2009; Wagner and Mulder, 2016). Not surprisingly, such processes recur in young adulthood, a demographically dense period that features a number of interconnected life events (Mulder and Hoornmeijer, 1999). Young adults migrate in order to start on an education track, a new job placement or to set up their own family household elsewhere. Yet, the nature of markers of the transition to adulthood in relation to internal migration over the life course is increasingly complex and dynamic (Feijen, 2005; Findlay, McCollum, Coulter, & Gayle, 2015). The perverseness of education inflation, employment instability and protracted school-to-work transition in post-industrial societies have likely fuelled the increase in the number of temporary relocations spanning the parental home, the places of study and the places of employment observed among greater shares of young adults (Sage, Evandrou, & Falkingham, 2013). As young people pursue further and higher levels of education and career stabilization is delayed, internal migration might not only be increasingly career driven, but also progressively detached from early household formation. Furthermore, youngsters’ mobility is likely to have adapted to new family scenarios, including less stable forms of partnership with shorter durations and later family formation. In addition, declining real wages and greater participation by women in the labour market – which indicates increasing gender egalitarianism, but also the need of two incomes to sustain family households – are reducing the returns to migration among families, partly driving an increased residential rootedness (Cooke, 2013).

Gathering rigorous evidence of such complex phenomena requires rich biographical information, which has only recently become available at a larger scale. Taking advantage of the growing collections of longitudinal data, research has shed new light on the specific life course triggers and outcomes of internal migration by substantiating a strong relationship between the timing of internal migration processes and life course events, particularly typical transitions to adult roles in the family and career domains (Coulter and Van Ham, 2013; Bernard, Bell, & Charles-Edwards, 2014). Less effort has been dedicated to understanding migration as part of established and emerging patterns of transitions to adult roles within the wider life courses of individuals. This is limiting, given that the structure of the transition to adulthood has profoundly changed in recent decades (Billari and Liebboer, 2010),

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\url{https://doi.org/10.1016/j.alcr.2018.03.003}

Received 11 May 2016; Received in revised form 23 March 2018; Accepted 26 March 2018

Available online 29 March 2018
in ways that have affected the relevance of internal migration for the individual life course.

The aim of this study is to contribute to portraying internal migration as part of unfolding individual life courses, drawing attention to the intersections between changing sociohistorical contexts and personal biographies in post-WWII West Germany. Two main questions guide our study. First, we examine the structure of early family and career (i.e., labour market) life courses of men and women across those who migrated (movers) and those stayed put (stayers) in early adulthood, addressing continuities and changes across four West German cohorts (RQ1). Second, we establish the trajectories of migration, family and labour market transitions over the young adult life course and assess their diversity for men and women from four West German cohorts (RQ2).

Our study belongs to a paradigm that examines the life course holistically, offering sophisticated descriptions of long-term trajectories across sociohistorical contexts. By identifying pertinent regularities, establishing patterns and examining the diversity in long-term trajectories of young adults, we complement and extend existing research, shedding light on the full complexity of individual life courses. Motivated by the proposition that individual life courses are historically embedded (Elder, 1977), ours is one of only a few studies that address the implications of vast social, economic and cultural transformations, which have precipitated rapid and profound changes in the structure of life courses since the second half of the 20th century, to study the relevance of internal migration for individual trajectories across time. We achieve this through deploying a cross-cohort comparative design to examine developments in individual life courses under different sociohistorical conditions.

Empirically, we address the research questions using detailed life history data from several cohort-specific retrospective surveys taken from the German Life History Study (Mayer, 2008) and examine sequences of states and events between ages 16 and 30 for representative samples of West German men and women born in 1939–41, 1949–51, 1964, and 1971.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. The life course and internal migration

The life course perspective evolved in the late 20th century, primarily drawing attention to the intersections between changing social contexts and young adults’ biographies, with a focus on family, work and other life dimensions in Western countries (Mitchell, 2003; Mayer, 2004). In the post-war period, occupational and family trajectories of young people were standard and predictable, with age-graded and chronologically ordered life stages and transitions. Employment career progression dominated the development of men’s life trajectories. Women were inclined to marry and take up family care responsibilities relatively early. Since approximately the late 1960s, career and family life courses have become progressively destandardized (Brückner and Mayer, 2005; Billari and Liebfroer, 2010). In other words, typical life transitions are increasingly shared by smaller proportions of the young adult population, they occur at disparate ages and no longer follow the standard sequences. Prominent, ongoing shifts include extended educational periods (Brzinsky-Fay, 2007), a protracted transition to economic or residential independence (Goldscheider and Goldscheider, 1999), postponing or relinquishing marriage and childbirth (Lesthaeghe and Willems, 1999), the rise of cohabitation, out-of-wedlock childbirth, divorce and remarriage (Corijn and Klijzing, 2003), increased employment of married women and mothers (Blossfeld and Hakim, 1997) and unstable occupational careers (Blossfeld, Klijzing, Mills, & Kurz, 2006). Educational expansion, weakening labour market and welfare protection, as well as ideational turns towards liberal attitudes are some of the most regularly identified major macrolevel processes driving the increasing complexity and diversity in life trajectories among recent birth cohorts (Blossfeld et al., 2006; Buchholz et al., 2009). Despite the persuasive claims of dramatic change in the nature of life courses, evidence found in recent research suggests that the pervasiveness of these transformations is not only smaller than initially proposed, but also varies widely across contexts and social structures, and is more related to gender, race or socioeconomic background (Brückner and Mayer, 2005; Widmer and Ritschard, 2009).

As a recurrent event during young adulthood, internal (as well as international) migration can also be viewed as a key element of structuration of the individual life course, with implications for recent sociohistorical developments. There are two reasons why this should be expected. First, migration processes are challenging and disruptive as they require, often major, adjustments to everyday life, including the adaptation to new social and cultural environments (Mulder, 1993, Courgeau, 1990). Given this, migration processes are often motivated by the opportunity to achieve life goals and improve wellbeing. It has been argued that the underlying desire to achieve personal success through decisions to migrate generates a relevant divide between those who stay and stick to the status quo, and those who move to take advantage of opportunities (Huinink, Vidal, & Kley, 2014). Even if distributed unevenly across social groups, positive migration impacts on social, economic or life quality outcomes have been documented (Schneider and Collet, 2010). Arguably, the accumulation of migration experience generates a sort of migration capital that prompts upwards social and economic mobility (Boyle, Halfacree, & Robinson, 2014, Köo and Bailey, 2014), and thus potential inequality between movers and stayers.

Second, internal migration is a relevant element in the transition to adulthood. By itself, internal migration marks an important stage in the transition to independence, contributing to construction of an identity away from family ties and connections to the home space (Giddens, 1991). The implications of migration for young adults’ life courses are also evidenced by the age profile, which broadly mirrors the age structure of other core events that mark the transition to adulthood across countries (Bernard et al., 2014). Using year-to-year transitions as the analytical focus and deploying event-history methods, research has aimed to uncover causal relationships between migration and life course transitions. Results have shown that education and labour market entry, as well as partnership and family formation or dissolution, act as stimuli for migration (Geist and McManus, 2008; Bailey, 2009). Given all this, shifts in the ways migration unfolds along with wider life course processes can be expected to echo changes in young adult life courses over recent periods.

While illuminating with regard to addressing some mechanisms of the underlying associations, research adopting a transition approach to the study of internal migration has been criticized for being conceptually narrow. Life course transitions do not occur in a contextual void, but are part of wider temporal processes (Halfacree and Boyle, 1993; Dykstra and van Wissen, 1999; De Jong and Graefe, 2008). Such processes can be established as trajectories consisting of long-term, complex intersections across the multiple markers of the transition to adulthood. A trajectory, or holistic, approach has been proposed to respond to substantial questions about changes in the structure of life courses across sociohistorical contexts and the identification of off-diagonal life courses (Aisenbrey and Fasang, 2010). The holistic approach has emerged in small scale, qualitative migration research that emphasizes the personal narrative, linking location and relocation with personal developments, from childhood to old age (Vanderbeck, 2005; McHugh, 2007; Smith and Holt, 2007; Stockdale and MacLeod, 2013). These studies adhered to common holistic notions of the individual life course defined as “a sequence of socially defined events and roles that the individual enact over time” (Giele and Elder, 1998). Only a few quantitative studies adopted a holistic approach and examined patterns in the internal migration trajectories using sequence analysis. While descriptive in its nature, a holistic approach combined with quantitative data analysis offers a greater capacity to document the complexity of life courses in their entirety than traditional approaches to the study migration. For instance, the pioneering study of Stovel and Bolan.
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