Mechtild Oechsle and Birgit Geissler

Between Paid Work and Private Commitments: Women’s Perceptions of Time and Life Planning in Young Adulthood

Time Structures and Gender

As the modernisation of society continues, the ability to coordinate one’s actions with the time structures of the social environment is increasingly becoming a necessary precondition for a functioning lifestyle. Although individuals begin to acquire the necessary knowledge and competencies in childhood and youth, the relevant learning processes continue on into adulthood. Particularly in young adulthood, individuals are faced with the tasks of relating their personal identity, their life goals and the perceptions of time on which these are based to social time structures (Maurer, 1994; Melucci, 1998), and of acquiring the competencies needed to achieve these objectives. Sociological research since the beginning emphasizes social construction of the life course (Hareven, 1986); individuals are only able to sketch out the course of their future lives if they are aware – implicitly, at least – of institutional and other socially prescribed time structures, social age norms and life-course patterns, and are able to apply this knowledge in their everyday and biographical actions.

References to social time structures – as opposed to natural rhythms and cycles – are implicit in many analyses of social change (Bergmann, 1992; Giddens, 1990). Furthermore, these analyses show that accelerated social change is always connected with the transformation of time structures and subjective experiences of time. In German sociology, the predominant approach to the analysis of social time structures is a socio-historical one, starting with the establishment of industrial capitalism. According to E.P. Thompson, the industrial organisation of labour was accompanied by the development of new work habits, the diffusion of a new time consciousness, and the internalisation of the new habit of time discipline (Thompson, 1967). Later authors are indebted to this theory of the work-related rationalisation and efficient use of time. “As a rule, work entails that the abstract continuum of time is regulated by external behavioural constraints, by a set social structure. (...) This work-related structuring of time ... thus has a socially normative character. Work ... structures the rhythms of everyday and biographical life” (Heinemann, 1982: 90, own translation). Accordingly, industrial time structures establish generally binding rules and mechanisms that distinguish time for paid work from all other uses of time, while the social construct of ‘standard’ working time (including shift work, overtime, etc.) determines the everyday temporal structures of private life.

In the above references to the everyday and biographical structuring of time, it is taken for granted that ‘work’ refers to ‘paid employment’ – in contrast to time off, weekends, retirement, etc. Likewise, in the mainstream concept of the life course as an institution, only the time structures of the occupational system are considered to be socially relevant. Kohli (1985) describes the life course as organised around paid work and its regulation in the welfare state by means of education and employment, the labour market and the social security system. But is it correct to assume that market and household labour really are strictly separated? As Becker-Schmidt was able to show in her analysis of the concept of gender relations, the interactions in question are
characterised by both separation and integration. While private life is organised around paid work in its “regimentation of consciousness and its temporal structure”, women “build bridges between the separate spheres” by virtue of their dual roles, and the two sexes link the spheres “in private life by means of their heterosexual relationships” (Becker-Schmidt, 1998: 16, own translation).

Little research has been conducted into the ways that unpaid work and personal commitments impact on the structuring of everyday life and life-course patterns. This is no coincidence, but reflects the structural dominance of the occupational system, and the assumption that private life will be tailored to working life (not only in temporal terms). The occupational system functions according to a logic that externalises all tasks, events, and processes in the life of an individual that are not related to his or her paid work in the market. These include not only events such as childbirth and the stages and status passages of the educational career, but also such banalities as moving house, falling ill, and helping one’s neighbours at short notice. Yet as a rule, non-occupational activities such as these impact just as strongly on women’s day-to-day time use and on the biographical sequencing of their lives as does paid work.

Although it cannot be disputed that liberation from the integrative structures of premodern society and the emergence of paid work as an agency of socialization have obliged individuals to take responsibility for the way they lead their lives and use their time, empirical studies and theoretical approaches concentrating on occupational time structures are very one-sided. In modern society, individuals are expected to coordinate consecutive life events and concurrent life spheres; we have called this life planning (Geissler / Oechsle, 1996). Neither the temporal structures of domestic and caring work and motherhood (Leccardi, 1996; 1998) nor other social factors regulating life time – interpersonal relationships, for example – have been explored using research questions and instruments designed specifically for this subject. It was only recently that researchers began to consider such ‘private’ time structures and the significance of occupational time constraints for private life (Hochschild, 1997; Jurczyk, 1998). As working hours become increasingly flexible and the boundaries between work and private life become blurred, attention is drawn to the (conflicting) relations between different time structures. This affords an opportunity to reconsider the one-sided focus of theory and research on occupational time constraints, and to develop a theory of the life course that is less focused on the notion of the ‘male normal biography’ than has thus far been the case.

Although the theory of the life course as an institution was originally geared to the male career model, attempts have been made to bring the model closer to the reality of the female life course (Geissler, 1998; see several chapters in Heinz (ed.), 1991b). To this end in german life course research the construct of the ‘female normal biography’, characterised by a family-centred life style, has been developed. In contrast to the male normal biography, however, this new ideal type is not backed by conclusive empirical evidence. Indeed, contrary to the assumptions underlying the construct of a normal female life style, the majority of women were and are in paid employment – though less likely than men to have a well-paid full-time job. Typical ‘female’ work includes unpaid family work and, in particular, irregular (i.e., insecure) forms of dependent employment such as outwork, part-time work and seasonal work. These forms of employment reflect a life style that is both work- and family-oriented; they are based on a temporal logic of their own that deviates from that of the ‘standard’ working day and occupational continuity. Furthermore, they provide for an endless variety of working hours, since the
The acknowledged fact that occupational time structures can be differentiated into institutionalised, ‘standard’ ones and non-institutionalised, ‘non-standard’ ones is an important point of reference for young adults in their life planning (Geissler / Oechsle, 1996: 31-39; Shanahan, 2000). In the investigation of how women plan and conduct their lives, the ways in which women perceive these different time structures and use them for their own life goals is of particular interest. How do women organise their own life as a life course – i.e., from a diachronic perspective – and cope with status passages? Moreover, how do they find a balance between paid work and private life on an everyday basis, reconciling synchronic and diachronic perspectives? These questions have provided an empirical and theoretical leitmotiv for our research since the Special Collaborative Centre on Status Passages and Risks in the Life Course was set up at the University of Bremen and we began our own research on life planning. The present article addresses the questions of how women relate to the various time structures of market labour in young adulthood, how they reconcile these with the temporal demands of their interpersonal relationships, and how significant the various ensuing configurations are for their occupational biographies and everyday lives.

The Dynamic Relationship of Integration into Working Life and Commitment to a Partner in Young Adulthood

If we are to formulate a comprehensive theory of the life course, we need to ask how the life course functions as a temporal structure not only where entry into working life and continuity of the occupational trajectory are concerned, but also with respect to linkages with the life-course patterns of others – long-term partners, children, parents (Yeandle, 1991; Born/Krüger 2001). Those linkages are in the core of the “paradox of uncertainty” of modern experience: it is impossible not to choose (Melucci, 1998: 180-181). Analysis of biographical processes in young adulthood can help us to address this problem for a number of reasons. Various time structures are relevant at this stage of life: the time structures of training institutions and paid work on the one hand, and those of the partnership and (planned) family on the other. It is also important not to overlook other ambitions such as travel, hobbies, voluntary work, political activity, etc., which have temporal structures of their own, and which may be given priority in the individual life plan.

Clearly, the time structures of the occupational system impact on women’s life goals in a variety of ways – and are often the dominant factor. Nevertheless, we consider two further elements of the transition from adolescence to adulthood to be just as important as the integration into working life, namely commitment to interpersonal relationships.

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1 In the context of a qualitative study on the “Life Planning of Young Women”, conducted between 1989 and 1992 at the Special Collaborative Centre 186, University of Bremen, we interviewed 75 young women in various forms of employment, with and without vocational training, about their career history, life at the time of the interview, and future plans for private life and career. As we were interested in the orientations and biographical choices of young women who have not yet started a family, we limited the sample to women without children.
(with a long-term partner) and anticipated responsibility (for a family). Furthermore, we propose that this holds for both sexes. The more or less permanent union of one’s own life with the life plan of a partner produces a distinct pattern of linkages that may collide with occupational time structures in both the synchronic (life style) and the diachronic (life course) dimensions, though this is not necessarily the case. Whereas labour market studies notice these constraints and anticipated conflicts in today's women's lives only after marriage (Crompton / Harris, 1999), we are convinced that anticipating future commitments will intervene decisively in the process of life planning in young adulthood.

As a result of modernisation processes in both the occupational system and the private sphere, the decisions that today’s young adults make about their careers and private lives are now far more provisional and reversible than was previously the case. Generally speaking, it can no longer be taken for granted that young adults relate their biographical actions exclusively to paid work and the associated temporal structures. Neither is it necessarily the case that relationships established in young adulthood ‘automatically’ restrict the individual’s occupational freedom (Goldscheider / Waite, 1987). The ways that the dynamic relationship between integration into working life and commitment to a partner develop in young adulthood, and the associated modes of linkage with various temporal structures, are not entirely independent of opportunity structures and resources (such as cohort membership, regional labour market structures, labour market demand for the occupation in question, social and cultural competencies, etc.). Nevertheless, they are more receptive to biographical actions than is the case for middle adulthood (see several chapters in Oechsle / Geissler (ed.) 1998). The extension and differentiation of forms of transition to the labour market, the erosion of ‘standard’ employment conditions, and the pluralisation of private life patterns have increased the demands on individual life planning and require new kinds of competencies.

As a result of these processes, young adulthood has acquired a new theoretical significance (Buchmann, 1989). It is not only a defining moment before biographical commitments are made (by obligation or design), and a stage of life at which multiple status transitions occur. It is also at this stage that the question of the relationship between institutional control and biographical planning (Mayer, 1991) takes on a particular relevance, as does the question of the competencies and the social and material resources needed to meet the demands mentioned above.

**Life Planning in Young Adulthood: Reflecting on Different Time Structures and Time-Related Competencies**

The individual is not enslaved by either time structures or social commitments. Rather, the forging of links with both occupational time structures and the lives of others calls for a proactive approach to life planning. As such, we are interested in individual conceptions of temporal structures and in the ways that individuals establish temporal links between the different spheres of life. We focus on the ways that individuals shape their own life course with regard to the time structures of the occupational system – whether institutionalised or ‘non-standard’/flexible – and in relation to the life courses of significant others. Relevant factors here, for example, would be the temporal structures of everyday life together (life style) and modes of linkage with the partner’s life goals (life planning). For most of today’s young women, it is no longer a question of simply adapting to the institutionally regulated life-course pattern of a male partner,
no questions asked. It is more a question of drawing up a medium-term blueprint of their future life together. In principle, the working hours and occupational career plans of both partners are put up for discussion (Hildebrandt 2000).

Therefore, we do not focus on institutional control of the life course, but examine the responses of individual actors to occupational time structures and interpersonal relationships as biographical options. We refer to previous theoretical works on life planning – defined as a meaningful linkage of the present to the past and the future – and further differentiate and develop this concept with reference to social time structures. Life planning is more than simply drawing up ‘blueprint’ of one’s life; it is a feat of social construction, involving integration into – or withdrawal from – institutions, the coordination of a functioning everyday life with others, and/or the achievement of ‘idiosyncratic’ life goals. As such, life planning relates to both ‘standard’ and ‘non-standard’ occupational time structures, as well as to the life goals of significant others. The latter aspect can be seen from a different perspective – in terms of the willingness or ability to make commitments and assume responsibility for others. For today’s young women, this willingness – traditionally ascribed to women – interrelates (or indeed competes) with the pursuit of autonomy (Geissler / Oechsle, 1996: 64).

For most young women in the transition to young adulthood, the exact nature of the relationship between autonomy and commitment has not yet been established. This is evident in that choices of partner are usually considered reversible, and that it is considered legitimate to change partners several times, or indeed to stay single. It is also apparent in that the decision of whether or not to have children is delayed for a long time. Most young women want to keep their career options open while practising self-determination in their interpersonal relationships. This presents an extremely challenging task for today’s young women, and one that goes beyond the boundaries of their individual situation in life, in that it obliges them to incorporate the life-course patterns of others in their life planning.

Thus, for young women life planning in young adulthood not only implies a proactive approach to the course of one’s own life, but also the coordination of time structures – some of which may collide – and the reconciliation of various life goals (Leccardi / Rampazi, 1993). This assumes that actors are aware of different time structures, that in turn necessitate specific competencies of everyday and life course management. The anticipation of one’s own life – based on existing time structures of paid work and interpersonal relationships – demands not only the cognitive abilities of perceiving and reflecting on different time structures and their mutual relations and contradictions, but also the competence to respond appropriately.

**Time Constraints of Paid Work and Biographical Commitments to Others: Patterns of Linkage and Detachment**

Individuals may respond to the time constraints of paid work by *linking* their own schedules and time use to these temporal structures – either in acknowledgement of the binding nature of these parameters or using them as a guiding framework. Alternatively, they may opt to *detach* their schedules and time use from the temporal structures of the occupational system. It is not unusual for this to occur simply because they are ignorant of important aspects of these temporal structures (e.g., deadlines). Detachment may also
be prompted by the fundamental or temporary rejection of paid work and the restrictions it places on one’s actions. Different combinations of linkage and detachment may reflect the development of new biographical time structures and predict the transformation of institutional time constraints. In the present article, the distinction between linkage and detachment serves as a basis for the analysis of young women’s responses to the time constraints of the occupational system and the temporal demands of personal commitments.

We explore empirically the ways that the temporal structures of training and paid work on the one hand, and commitments to significant others on the other, are reflected in the biographical decisions made by women in young adulthood. We use cases studies to illustrate the knowledge about occupational time structures that young women draw on when making biographical choices and how they respond to these time constraints. We also examine how young women establish links with their partner’s life goals, how they subjectively anticipate or reject such a linkage.

Forging links with the time structures of the occupational system or with the life courses of others (especially a partner) may restrict the scope for biographical action, but this is not necessarily the case. Rather, consciously establishing relations to these time structures may increase the scope for individual action, as indeed may partial or total detachment. While it is true that detachment from occupational time structures and linkage with the life goals of a partner is more prevalent among women than among men, it is no longer correct to equate this biographical pattern with the ‘traditional female’ life course and its subordination to the male life course. As we will show by reference to empirical case studies, configurations of linkage and detachment are many and varied, and there are numerous other biographical patterns apart from that in which the woman’s life course is determined by the man’s occupational trajectory.

In the following, we describe various patterns by which the life style and life course are interconnected with – or detached from – the time structures of the occupational system. The empirical basis for this typology is provided by our study on the life planning of young women (see footnote 1). We distinguish three patterns of relationship to the time structures of the occupational system: linkage to ‘standard’ occupational time structures, linkage to ‘non-standard’ occupational time structures, and detachment from these time structures. These three patterns are further differentiated by the question of commitment to others: Are the women’s life courses linked to, or detached from, those of significant others?
Table 1: Patterns of Linkage and Detachment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Relation to the occupational system</th>
<th>Linkage to ‘standard’ occupational time structures</th>
<th>Linkage to ‘non-standard’ occupational time structures</th>
<th>Detachment from the time structures of the occupational system</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Relation to the life course of a partner</td>
<td>1a</td>
<td>2a</td>
<td>3a</td>
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**Linking the Life Course to ‘Standard’ Occupational Time Structures – Reducing Complexity (Cells 1a and 1b)**

This pattern is characterised by the active and conscious linkage of one’s own life goals to the institutionalised time structures of the occupational system. The ‘standard’ working day provides the temporal framework for day-to-day life, but it is also accepted that workplace norms may elicit even greater time commitments; the private sphere of life has to adapt to this fixed temporal structure. Action (both everyday and biographical) is organised around the ‘standard’ time structures of the occupational system and the model of occupational continuity that is inherent in the construct of ‘standard’ employment conditions. Young women who take this approach do their best to avoid interruptions in the career path (involuntary change of employer or occupation, periods of unemployment, etc). They invest additional time in further training, even if this has a considerable impact on their daily lives, and reflect on potential occupational trajectories and career opportunities.

Analyses based on individualisation theory often emphasise the difficulties of linking two career biographies, evoking the nightmare scenario of a fully mobile society of singles (Beck 1992). We do not consider these assumptions to be valid, however, at least not where childless couples are concerned. In our sample, young women with various levels of education have indeed succeeded in establishing links with the temporal structures of both the occupational system and the life course of their partner (cell 1a). This pattern of *dual linkage* is not particularly complicated or conflict-ridden – on the contrary.

In this pattern, institutionalised time structures regulate the couple’s life together, and are accepted by both partners. In the words of one of our respondents, “Work takes priority, even over my relationship”. The temporal structures of the occupational system do not discriminate according to gender; their constraints apply to both men and women. The shared focus on the ‘standard’ working day determines the temporal structure of the couple’s life together. For example, when another of our respondents complained to her partner that her job at a bank left her too little time to pursue her other interests, he responded that he saw no reason for her to reduce her working hours –
she should work eight hours a day, just like he does. Moreover, because both parties are subject to the same time structures, they see no cause for a gendered division of domestic labour. Thus, in constellations such as these, where young, childless (and usually unmarried) couples live together, institutionalised time structures tend to promote the egalitarian division of domestic labour rather than hindering it. Indeed, the fact that both partners arrange their plans around the time structures of the occupational system has a stabilising effect on both their individual occupational careers and their life together as a couple.

This kind of arrangement is not always compatible with the time structures of the occupational system, however. It is only when both partners acknowledge market labour as the main factor structuring both of their life courses, and sanction the egalitarian division of domestic labour, that this kind of arrangement can succeed. If labour is not equally distributed, or the male partner refuses to participate in such an arrangement, young women experience a conflict between the time constraints of their job and the temporal structures of their relationship. From their point of view, stable integration into working life can then only be achieved as an individual project. This implies detaching their own life course from that of their partner – to a greater or lesser extent, and either temporarily or permanently (cell 1b).

One of the women in our sample, a 25-year-old industrial seamstress, consciously avoids a potential conflict between the temporal demands of her job and those of her relationship. She has begun continuing training at her current workplace in the metal industry, with the aim of advancing to the position of Industriemeister or certificated forewoman. She does not intend to move in with her partner in the foreseeable future, but instead plans to stay living at home with her mother. Despite also having a job, her mother does most of the housework. The respondent chooses this way of life because she anticipates problems with the domestic division of labour if she moves in with her partner. She does not believe that she will be able to achieve her goal of obtaining further qualifications and advancing her career if she moves in with her partner. Her current life style is determined by the occupational and temporal demands of her job – and by the familial services of another ‘significant other’, her mother.

While the previous case illustrates what could be termed a ‘preventive avoidance’ of overly strong links with the life course of a partner, there are other cases in which existing links are loosened or dissolved. This is illustrated by the case of a 23-year-old married respondent. Having broken off an apprenticeship as a retail saleswoman and spending several years in semi-skilled jobs interspersed by periods of unemployment, she has begun to retrain as a florist – her dream job. Before she started retraining, she had assumed the responsibility for almost all of the domestic labour as a matter of course. Now that she has started pursuing new career goals, however, she is no longer prepared to take sole responsibility for the housework, and finds that the temporal demands of domestic labour collide with those of her training programme. Because her

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2 Meuser (1998) observed a similar pattern among young craftsmen, where a more or less egalitarian division of domestic labour had evolved “almost naturally, a necessity arising from the fact that both men and women were in work” (Meuser, 1998: 249, own translation).
husband is not prepared to see this from her perspective, there has been considerable tension in the marriage, and she is considering a separation.

A gendered division of labour in which women are allocated the primary or sole responsibility for domestic and caring work, resulting in distinct forms of time use among men and women, is the main problem in the conflict between paid work and cohabitation with a partner. This division of labour is sometimes stipulated explicitly by the partners, but it sometimes also functions as a guideline for the women themselves, or may evolve more or less naturally from certain constellations in the couples’ occupational biographies (e.g., if the woman is unemployed while the man is in paid employment). In the long run, however, a gendered division of labour cannot be reconciled with a strong work orientation on the woman’s part. Work-oriented women are often only able to stabilise this orientation and organise their life around the time structures of the occupational system by leaving their partner.

These women find that arranging their life course around the time constraints of the occupational system while detaching their biographical plans from the life-course patterns of a partner helps to reduce the complexity of conflicting time structures. Their lives are regulated by the daily and biographical time structures of paid work, which in fact afford more opportunities than constraints. As such, the orientation to work reduces the burden on these women.

*Detaching One’s Life Goals from the Time Structures of the Occupational System (Cells 3a and 3b)*

In these constellations, the life style is not regulated primarily by the temporal structures of the occupational system. On the contrary, because the time constraints of paid work collide with the individual’s life goals, the life style is detached from the temporal structures of the occupational system. There is considerable variation in the extent of this detachment; it is dependent not only on opportunity structures and resources, but also on the young woman’s life plans and work-related orientations. Detachment from institutionalised time structures may be associated with close bonds to others and a shared life with a partner (cell 3a), but it may also involve detachment from the life-course patterns of others (cell 3b).

The biography of a young woman who trained as a gardener, was hired by the company that trained her, and then decided to hand in her notice, is characteristic of what can be termed *dual detachment* (cell 3b). After a spell of unemployment, she attempted to complete her upper secondary leaving certificate (*Abitur*) at an adult education centre. At the time of the interview, however, she was paid by the hour to work nights at a petrol station. Although she had initially made a serious attempt to obtain her *Abitur*, her efforts had ultimately foundered because was unaware of the formal requirements for social transfers and for educational programmes such as these. More specifically, because she had failed to comply with certain deadlines and application formalities when moving from one city to another, she was found that she was no longer eligible for a student grant. In her current job at the petrol station, she has largely detached both the daily rhythms of her life and her biographical perspectives from the time structures of the occupational system. She works at night, her contract can be terminated at any time, and her immediate plans relate to an extended period of travelling. In general, she rejects fixed ‘schedules’ and the idea of occupational continuity or career success in her own life. Although this young woman maintains social relationships, they are neither
stable nor permanent, and thus provide only very limited biographical orientation. She shares her apartment with a female flatmate, emphasises her need to have “other people around” and states that friendships are important to her. Nevertheless, no biographical commitments have emerged from these friendships, and she is free to move from one city to the next at any time.

In this pattern of dual detachment, the life style is not regulated by the time constraints of either the occupational system or the life course of a partner. Most of the women we classified as belonging to this cell of the typography do not have a life plan; they are either in insecure jobs or are unemployed, and respond to opportunity structures as they arise.

A second pattern of detachment from the time structures of paid work involves close links to the life course of a partner, usually in the institutionalised form of marriage (cell 3a). Here, priority is given to the shared life as a couple. Having one’s own job – and the time constraints that this entails – is of secondary importance to this shared life and its temporal structures. The woman’s life course is thus detached from occupational time structures, or is only attached to them indirectly, as a function of her partner’s job.

This type of close linkage to the life course of a partner is characteristic of women with family-oriented life plans (Geissler / Oechsle 1996: 131f.). In consensus with their partner, these women arrange their lives around a traditional gendered division of labour and the man’s role as breadwinner. The couple’s joint project consists in starting a family, and one important precondition for this is that the man has a secure job. Their life together is structured by the institutionalised time structures of this job. The woman’s decisions regarding her own employment revolve around the future temporal structures of her partner’s job – both those currently effective and those anticipated for the future.

This pattern of combined detachment and linkage can also be observed among highly trained and educated women, as illustrated by the case of a shipping industry employee. This respondent entered her current relationship before deciding on a profession, with far-reaching consequences for her eventual career choice. Although she had always dreamt of becoming a nurse, she never actually applied for a place at nursing college because she feared that her shifts at the hospital would collide with her husband’s shifts as an engineer. In other words, long before starting a family, this young woman based her career plans on the assumption that the temporal structures of their life together would be determined by the time constraints of her partner’s job. She accepts that her husband’s job will take priority, and anticipates that it will only be possible to integrate their two life courses by loosening her own attachments to the occupational system and the temporal structures inherent in it.

As such, as early as young adulthood, decisions are made that set women’s life-course patterns in asymmetric relation to the job-centred life plans of their partners. It is reasonable to assume that this pattern will be further reinforced when these couples start a family. It is by no means the case that these decisions are imposed on the women by their partners. Indeed, arranging their lives around a partner’s life course may well reduce the burden on women in the sense that it makes biographical decisions less complex. Women taking this approach do not need to reconcile different sets of time constraints, for example. Both daily and life course scheduling are regulated by the
man’s job, and both their life as a couple and future life as a family keep to the limits of this framework.

The advantage of the patterns of linkage and detachment described thus far is that they reduce the complexity of everyday and biographical decisions. Such decisions are regulated either by the time structures of the occupational system or by those of the partnership and future family. In the case of dual detachment, the life course is not structured by either domain.

In organising their lives around a particular time structure, individuals make the fundamental decision of prioritising one sphere of life over the others. This reduces the burden of everyday and biographical choices by limiting the number of options available and facilitating responses to conflicting temporal demands. Pressure on the institutions in question is also relieved, however, in that potential incompatibilities between different time structures do not arise or are externalised from the outset. In the patterns described thus far, neither the occupational system nor the gendered division of labour come under pressure to change.

Notes

Linking the Life Course to ‘Non-Standard’ Occupational Time Structures – Contradictory Connections and Complex Time Management (Cells 2a and 2b)

In contrast to the patterns discussed above, the configuration described in the following is characterised by the complex interconnection of different time structures. Occupational time constraints are by no means negated, but neither are they accepted as the dominant structuring factor. In this pattern, the aim is rather to increase the permeability of ‘standard’ occupational time structures, and to make these compatible with other life goals – but without completely rescinding one’s attachment to paid work and the temporal constraints that it entails. As such, the various demands on one’s time need to be constantly re-balanced – in both the everyday and the biographical perspective. Young women located in these cells of the typology must repeatedly address the question of which of the demands on their time they can satisfy, and which they consider to be legitimate or illegitimate. They negate the hierarchy of the spheres of life in their biographical choices, and instead attempt to reconcile the temporal structures of the different spheres of life in a rather idiosyncratic manner. To this end, they make use of existing ‘non-standard’ occupational time structures, combining these in a variety of ways.

There are a number of variants on this kind of linkage with ‘non-standard’ occupational time structures. Such a configuration may either be associated with strong links to the life-course patterns of others (cell 2a) or prompted by a particular life goal (cell 2b). It is frequently assumed that young adults tackling the major developmental task of integration into working life focus on ‘standard’ occupational time structures. Viewed from this perspective, a job with ‘non-standard’ working hours is interpreted as a structural consequence of deregulation of the occupational system rather than as a conscious biographical decision on the part of the young adult. Yet this approach overlooks the possibility that young adults may well have subjective motives for choosing ‘non-standard’ time structures.

This can be illustrated by the case of a qualified nurse. After a number of short-term contracts (where she would have preferred a permanent one), she left a permanent nursing position because her understanding of patient care could not be reconciled with
the time constraints of the job. Following a spell of unemployment, she has now begun to retrain as a travel agent. In so doing, she is forging a link to interests she shares with her partner, namely travelling and motorcycling. She does not want to re-enter the temporal structures of dependent employment, however. Rather, she and her partner plan to go into business with another couple and set up an agency specialising in motorcycle holidays or holidays for disabled people. She spends her spare time with her partner: gardening, baking bread, making preserves, taking motorcycle trips, or caring for both sets of parents and grandparents, a task which – even when shared – is extremely time-consuming. During her several years of employment as a nurse, she twice handed in her notice in order to care for members of her family. For this respondent, linkage with the life courses of others also applies to her parents and to other important people in her life.

The main concerns of this young woman are caring for her elderly relatives, pursuing the interests she shares with her partner, and enjoying their rural life together. This kind of lifestyle can only be combined with paid employment if she accepts ‘non-standard’ time structures and incorporates periods of unemployment and retraining into her life plan. She has also given up the idea of achieving continuity in her occupational biography. In taking this approach, institutionalised time structures can be qualified to the extent that they become compatible with her life goals and her relationship with her partner. In contrast to women with family-centred life plans, this form of life is not based on a gendered division of labour, but on a more or less egalitarian one.

Although this kind of orientation to ‘non-standard’ occupational time structures already plays a certain role for women in young adulthood, it assumes paramount importance when they start a family. Women who embark on this biographical ‘project’ are immediately faced with the problem of how to reconcile ‘normal’ occupational time structures with the demands of life with (young) children. Those with a dualistic life plan are particularly likely to arrange their lives around time structures deviating from those of ‘standard’ working hours. This approach may go hand-in-hand with a strong work orientation.

This can be illustrated by the biography of a respondent who originally trained as a hairdresser, but was forced to leave this career path for health reasons. She retrained as a travel agent and, at the time of the interview, was deeply committed to this occupation. Her work is very important to her, and since she doesn’t want to “do things by halves”, she sees a full-time job as only natural at the present time. Her plans are not dominated by an occupational career, however, as she regards motherhood and a career as mutually exclusive. She and her partner plan to get married and start a family, at which point she will give up her job for a few years before returning to work on a part-time basis. She does not believe that it is possible to plan one’s re-entry to the labour market and makes no such plans for her own return, stating that it is impossible to predict which sphere of life will take priority. As such, re-entering working life is something that “you just have to take as it comes’. This model of taking a career break before re-entering the labour market on a part-time basis is attractive because it gives women the implicit assurance that they will be able to reconcile a (rather ‘non-standard’) occupational time structure with the demands of the family. At the planning stage, future parents often fail to realise that this kind of arrangement generally only succeeds if backed up by additional ‘maintenance work’ and that it often leads to women working in jobs for which they are overqualified. Linkage to ‘non-standard’
time structures helps both the nurse and the ex-hairdresser to reconcile paid work with commitment to and care for others.

Women may have other motives for orienting their lives around temporal structures that deviate from those of the ‘standard’ working day, however. One example is the biography of a 28-year-old nursery school teacher who spent seven years in various short-term contracts despite being offered several permanent jobs in the profession. Following a fairly long period of unemployment interspersed with temporary jobs in day care facilities, she has now begun further training as a therapist. She worked in a job-creation scheme for almost three years in order to finance the training programme, but rejected the offer of a permanent job in the project. At the time of the interview, she is claiming unemployment benefit, works in a boutique on an hourly basis, and is in the process of setting up her own practice as a therapist.

Short-term contracts and periods of unemployment provide this young woman with a highly flexible – and yet not entirely insecure – framework within which she is able to work towards personal fulfilment and career reorientation. In contrast to other women in our sample, she responds very skilfully to the temporal and institutional demands of the occupational system and does not withdraw completely from paid work or ‘standard’ working hours. Instead, she exploits ‘non-standard’ time structures to the advantage of her own life goals. What is remarkable about this young woman is how she manages to synchronise and balance the various temporal demands of her workplace, her training programme, her holidays, and her other ambitions. Complex time management allows her to unite various – and not necessarily compatible – temporal structures to form an integral whole, and thus to enjoy a highly individualised life style.

**Paid Work and Commitments to Others: Opportunities and Risks of Various Biographical Configurations**

The various patterns of linkage to and detachment from the time constraints of the occupational system demonstrate the high degree of differentiation in the lives of today’s young women. Both the time constraints of the occupational system and the temporal demands of a relationship and prospective family can structure everyday life and biographical choices. However, there may also be complex and conflicting interconnections with the temporal structures of other spheres of life, calling for enhanced time management.

The typology presented in this article shows that, even in young adulthood, life courses are structured not only by the time constraints of the occupational system, but by interconnections with the life-course patterns of others. This holds for the young women in our sample, at least. It would doubtless be worth examining how similar linkages structure the life-course patterns of men, particularly as life-course research continues to focus on paid work. The assumption of a ‘one-way street’ leading women from young adulthood to the life-course configurations of middle adulthood is not confirmed by our results either. Women are presented with a multitude of options in young adulthood, and some young women very consciously avoid the asymmetric relations to the work-oriented life-course patterns of others that are associated with commitment to and care for others.
The question as to the opportunities and risks inherent in the various configurations of linkage and detachment is of great interest here. Linkage with ‘standard’ occupational time structures can help women to become securely integrated into the occupational system. As a rule, women who set their priorities accordingly in young adulthood have a strong career orientation and actively contribute to their integration in the labour market. In young adulthood, before starting a family, organising one’s life around occupational time structures in this way can certainly be compatible with a partnership and may, under certain conditions, promote an egalitarian gender division of labour. However, this assumes that both partners accept this division of labour and consider ‘standard’ employment conditions to be binding for both sexes. If these conditions are not fulfilled, women are often confronted with problems of reconciliation (in this case, how to combine their job with their relationship) even before starting a family; they are forced to prioritise and to make the necessary decisions. The dominance of occupational time structures over family life is not called into question, but reproduced in daily life. However, it cannot be denied that this dominant form of linkage with the ‘standard’ time structures of the occupational system represents a modernisation of women’s life styles.

The various patterns of detachment from occupational time structures (cells 3a and 3b) entail a variety of risks for women. In the case of dual detachment – from both occupational time structures and the life courses of others (cell 3b) – women run a considerable risk of marginalisation, as they are not generally in a position to secure an independent livelihood by means of paid work or to derive an equal measure of security from marriage. Because our study is cross-sectional in design, however, we cannot comment on the future life course of the groups identified. In the case of detachment from occupational time structures, but interconnection with the life course of a partner, asymmetric relations between the female and the male life course are established as early as young adulthood. It is reasonable to assume that this pattern will be reinforced when the couples start a family. Here again, occupational time structures continue to dominate over time for family and care work.

Linkages with ‘non-standard’ occupational time structures and the contradictory connections of various temporal structures that such arrangements entail (cells 2a and 2b) are of particular interest. They do not simply reproduce existing time structures, but may help to transform them. For the women concerned, this implies opportunities for an individualised life style on the one hand, but risks as regards labour market integration and social security on the other.

The patterns of linkage described in the present article indicate that, where the life styles of young adults are concerned, the transformation of time structures is already relatively well advanced. The patterns also illustrate the prevalence of the social and cultural competencies of reflecting on various time structures and making use of institutional resources. However, the current state of research does not allow any conclusions to be drawn about whether these processes will contribute to the transformation of institutional time structures in the long term, thus improving the structural preconditions in which women struggle to find a balance between time for paid work on the one hand and private commitments on the other.
References


