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FROM 'WORK-FAMILY' TO 'FLEXIBLE CAREERS'

A life course reframing

In this paper we introduce key concepts that inform a life course perspective, including its focus on the temporal organization of career paths and life biographies. We demonstrate the value of a life course approach to theorizing about, studying, and considering work-family arrangements and their policy implications. To do so we draw primarily on findings from studies undertaken using the Ecology of Careers Study funded by the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation. The value of both the life course and career concepts comes in recognizing the dynamics of the work-family interface, as well as the need to address and redress the mismatch between the new workforce and outmoded labour market policies as they occur at all multi-layered stages of workers' biographies. Drawing on this perspective, and concentrating on the USA in comparison with select European countries, we argue that 'work-family' policy and research agendas for the twenty-first century need to be recast from the current 'work' and 'family' dichotomy to a more complex view of careers in context. Careers are not only dynamic and relational, they are also embedded within existing gender, occupational, and labour market regimes as well as within changes in the workforce, the workplace, and temporal boundaries. Existing policy and practice in the USA reveal cultural lags in responding to concerns of gender, family, and work, as well as prospects for meaningful change.

Keywords career; life course; work; family; gender; policy

In dit artikel introduceren we basisconcepten omtrent het levensloop perspectief, inclusief de tijdelijke organisatie van carrierepaden en levensbeschrijvingen. Wij demonstreren de waarde van het levensloop perspectief met betrekking tot theorisering over, bestudering en overweging van werk-familie arrangementen en hun politieke implicaties. Dit werk baseert zich hoofdzakelijk op de bevindingen van het Cornell Careers Institute: A Sloan Center for the Study of Working Families. De waarde van zowel het levensloop als carrière concepten wordt onderstaafd door herkenning van de dynamiek van het werk-familie scheidingsvlak, als wel de noodzaak tot het herstellen van de slechte combinatie tussen de nieuwe arbeidskrachten en de verouderde arbeidsmarkt politiek die zich manifesteert in de veelgelaagde fasen van de levensgeschiedenis van arbeiders. Vanuit dit perspectief, met aandacht op de Verenigde Staten in vergelijking met geselecteerde

Europese landen, pleiten wij voor het herzien van werk–familie politiek en onderzoeks agendas voor de 21ste eeuw. We moeten van de huidige dubbelpolige formule van ‘werk’ en ‘familie’ naar een complexere visie met betrekking tot carrières. Deze carrières zijn vastgelegd in veranderingen in arbeidskrachten, de werkplaats en tijdelijke grenslijnen. De huidige politiek en praktijk in de V.S. onthullen culturele achterstanden in de reactie op aangelegenheden betreffende de geslachten, familie en werk, alswel in de vooruitzichten om zinvolle veranderingen te realiseren.

Trefwoorden werk-familie; carrières; levensloop; geslachtsrollen; pensioen

A life course perspective on the topic of ‘work and family’ moves the discourse from one of individuals, and their conflicting or enabling role obligations at any one point in time, to a focus on dynamic relationships between roles and among individuals as lives unfold: (1) over time, (2) in tandem, and (3) in particular contexts. The life course approach developed in response to an effort to understand the implications of social change on individual lives — especially landmark events such as immigration (Thomas & Znaniecki, 1918–1920) and the Great Depression (Elder, 1974, 1998). This complex interface among social structures, social changes, and individual biographies — including the discrepancies and disjunctures where they intersect (Giele & Elder, 1998; Moen, 2003a; Riley, Kahn, & Foner, 1994) — remains the hallmark of life course scholarship.

In this paper we are interested in identifying cultural and policy lags in the USA, as informed by a life course perspective, and comparing differences between the US responses to work–family conflicts with the approaches observed in select European countries. To do this, we address three issues. First, we briefly identify key concepts that underpin a life course perspective. Second, we elaborate on this perspective by demonstrating its application to ways of thinking about and investigating work–family arrangements. Finally, we conclude by moving discussion from identifying structural ‘lags’ to a focus on ‘leads’, and the need for new cultural schema and policy regimes that meet the needs of today’s, not yesterday’s, workforce. This involves reframing and broadening the ‘work–family’ issue to one of ‘careers’ as they unfold in multi-layered contexts and over the life course. Doing so will facilitate addressing and redressing the mismatches between the new workforce and outmoded labour market, family, and community policies at all stages of the life course.

Key concepts that define a life course perspective

The *life course* can be thought of as the series of role entries, trajectories, and exits that constitute people’s biographies. The term is often used interchangeably with concepts like *life cycle* and *lifespan*, but these tend to connote biological development and biological ageing, apart from the multiple cultural constellations and institutionalized meanings of time. Even though life course scholars incorporate biological components in the form of various developmental markers, they place their greatest emphasis on the social construction and institutional embeddedness of individual

biographies in a commonly accepted system of age-graded roles and relationships. What is perhaps most important, the life course connotes *time and context*.

There are multiple temporal dimensions to the study of the life course. It is a dynamic, multi-level, multi-system, and multi-relational social structure and process. The life course has been defined as transitions and trajectories of roles and relationships over (chronological) time (Elder, 1994; Giele & Elder, 1998; Settersten & Owens, 2002). But time itself has multiple meanings. Consider first *historical time*. A life course focus emphasizes the significance of the times in which one lives for understanding, for example, gendered roles and relationships (Elder, 1996; Moen, 1998; Settersten & Mayer, 1997; Settersten & Owens, 2002). This contributes to the *life stage principle*; the timing of events — such as wartime experiences or the women's movement — in individual lives and in particular age cohorts of the population shapes subsequent life paths. Frequently, the effects of historical events and large-scale social changes are also different for men and women, as well as other status groupings (Elder, 1996, 1998; Giele & Elder, 1998; Moen, 2001, 2003a, 2003b).

A second temporal dimension is captured by *biographical time*, the biological and experiential life paths of individuals and families as they age (e.g. Mortimer & Shanahan, 2003). A focus on biography points to the importance of individual differences in both genetic endowments and early experiences, especially in childhood and in the transition to adulthood (e.g. Furstenberg, Brooks-Gunn, & Morgan, 1987; Mortimer, Lorence, & Kumka, 1986). But biographical experiences matter in the progression through — and out of — the career- and family-building years as well (Han & Moen, 1999a, 1999b; Moen & Orrange, 2002; Moen, Sweet, & Swisher, in press).

A third dimension is *social time*, that is, the socially constructed and institutionalized entry and exit portals into and out of various roles and relationships at various ages and stages, and for particular subgroups of the population. This is what Riley, Johnson, and Foner (1972) refer to as the *age-stratification system*, but it encompasses as well all systems of stratification that privilege some people over others due to their social statuses or credentialing. Social time includes the temporal routines, regulations, and rules that define the nature of possible trajectories and transitions. Through the analysis of the (often hidden) constitution, as well as the construction and reconstruction, of social time, scholars can identify how windows of opportunity open, even as others close. Rather than focus on 'work-family' or even 'work-family policies' in the abstract, scholars can show how temporal regimes governing roles and relationships in particular societies, communities, and organizations constrain the universe of options available for individuals and groups to shape not only the work-family nexus, but their careers and life courses (e.g. Kohli, 1986; Marshall, Heinz, Krüger, & Verma, 2001; Moen 2003a, 2003b).

Permeating these interlocking temporal constellations are other key life course themes: *agency* (the degree to which individuals shape their own life course and the strategic choices they make within existing constraints), *relationships* (the fact that individuals are embedded in communities of close and distal ties that affect their choice sets, their information, their beliefs, their values), *meaning* (how individuals and groups define their own identities and values, as well as various objective circumstances, and come to hold certain temporal expectations), and *context* (the

multi-layered demographic, economic, technological, community, organizational, and situational ecologies in which biographies unfold).

The life course intersects with studies of work and organizational policy around the concept of 'career'. In its contemporary usage in sociology, a career constitutes a progression between statuses, which can either follow normative sequences or deviate from dominant patterns. Crucial to this insight is that careers extend beyond occupational concerns and into other aspects of people's lives, such as family careers and marking progressions through family forms and structures.

In terms of occupational careers, it is important to realize that the whole idea of an orderly (and generally upwardly mobile) career is really a product of industrialization and urbanization, along with the concomitant development and bureaucratization of occupational lines. Throughout the twentieth century, an 'orderly' career became an indispensable means toward promotion of life chances and achievement of life quality (Wilensky, 1961), as well as an effective, productive economy (Levy, 1986). These arrangements, based on full-time, uninterrupted paid work, also became a 'hook' for other institutional templates, producing a system of integrated meanings and expectations. This *career mystique* (Moen & Roehling, 2004), both under-girds and is under-girded by organizational, occupational, community, and life course regimes of age- and gender-related policies and practices, including those related to the social organization of work hours within the day, week, year, and life course.

Similarly, templates guiding understandings of family careers, and what constitutes a 'normal' development of a 'normal' family have varied throughout the twentieth century (Aldous, 1996; Coontz, 1992; Smith, 1993). Only of late have researchers and the public become concerned with the challenges faced, for instance, by dual-earner couples and how families adjust their overlapping work and family careers as they progress through the life course.

Thus, a chief interest of life course research is to identify cultural *templates*, the *taken-for-granted and built-in meanings and expectations* about how lives should be lived, *differences* in these templates for particular subgroups (especially by age, race, class, and gender), and the resulting *inequalities*, as well as other impacts, these templates have on the ways people chart and experience their lives. One such concern is the persistence of the traditional *male breadwinner, female homemaker template* of family life and work life. The ramifications of this outdated conception of the family and the workforce is compounded by a secondary belief in the standardized, *lock-step life course* that, for workers, is patterned after traditional male career paths (e.g. first education, then continuous full-time employment, then the continuous full-time 'leisure' of retirement). Increases in longevity, a global competitive economy, the rise of single-parent families, and the ascendancy of the dual-earner couple as the new workforce and new family norm, are all creating *mismatches* and *cultural contradictions* between today's realities and the existing *rules of the game* emanating from these taken-for-granted schema (see also Moen, 1994, 2003a; Riley, 1987; Riley et al., 1994).

When researchers and policy makers adopt a life course perspective, questions and responses are reshaped in fundamental ways. To examine the work-family interface as it moves within the unfolding of multiple life paths, one begins to consider the individual, couple, or family unit in terms of *biographical circumstances* (such as age, as well as family or career stage) within various ecological *contexts* (such

as gender, class, race and ethnicity, family, organization, occupation, community, policy) across *time* (both historically and within the lives of individual workers from one year to the next), along with the *subjective meanings, cultural expectations, and choices*. In other words, family–work linkages simply cannot be understood apart from the larger social forces shaping them.

Accounting for contradictions and mismatches

To locate the mismatches confronting workers and working families as they relate to career concerns, we focus below on three trends: (a) changing gender relations, (b) changing age structures and life course sequences, and (c) changing contracts between employers and employees. We believe that these trends, in combination, remain juxtaposed against a structural and cultural regime of outdated social expectations and arrangements. The contradictions that follow from what are now outdated historical adjustments to industrialization and bureaucratization of work and careers in the USA, but are also evident in other countries in varying degrees as well (Blossfeld & Drobic, 2001). In our discussion below we focus particularly on implications for middle-class dual-earner couples in the USA, but, clearly, such a life course perspective can be applied to considering other groups as well (including cross national, socio-economic, or demographic comparisons; Moen & Roehling, 2004).

Changing gender compositions and gender roles

Historically the USA and other advanced societies operated on the premise that wives and mothers would (and should) do the domestic labour of society in order to free husbands and fathers to work in the paid economy. The fact that women now constitute almost half the labour force in the USA challenges well-entrenched employment and work-hour policies and practices designed for a predominantly male workforce, a workforce without childcare, eldercare, or other domestic responsibilities, as well as the cultural scripts of 'breadwinner' and 'homemaker' (Gerson, 2004).

Our studies (e.g. Becker & Moen, 1999; Clarkberg & Moen, 2001; Moen & Sweet, 2003) show that most dual-earner couples prefer to work shorter hours, and that this desire is most strongly expressed (and followed through) by women with young children. However, current policies penalize scaling back on work hours, both in the short term (part-time jobs often pay less and provide no benefits) and in the long term (careers are dislodged; pension eligibility delayed or denied). For example, although exempting professional occupations from its purview, the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938 established the eight-hour workday/40-hour workweek as a way of redistributing employment during the Great Depression (Golden, 1998). This standard has remained fundamentally unchanged for over 60 years. Along with payroll tax policies (Social Security and Medicare), this law makes hiring two part-timers more costly for employers than one full-time employee. Moreover, growing numbers of workers are now exempt from the law's mandated special overtime compensation provisions. Professionals, in particular, are encouraged to work long hours for a fixed salary in order to 'move ahead' or even to keep their

jobs. But this is all predicated on a one-career-per-family motif, assuming a full-time homemaker as part of the package, thereby freeing the worker to focus unimpeded on 'his' job.

How do two career couples operate in this one-career world? Our evidence — from a range of samples — suggests that the prevailing strategy among American couples is to adopt a *neotraditional* arrangement, giving priority to the husband's career when family time requirements increase (see Clarkberg & Merola, 2003; Clarkberg & Moen, 2001; Moen & Sweet, 2003; Moen & Yu, 2000; Pixley & Moen, 2003). Although this is the modal strategy — placing the wife's career as secondary — our evidence suggests egalitarian arrangements, such as when both spouses work 'regular jobs' (i.e. not overly long workweeks) may, in fact, offer greater potential for enhancing life quality (Moen & Sweet, 2003; Moen & Yu, 1999, 2000).

To encapsulate, a life course approach to the changing gender composition of the workforce points to:

- Historical, and hence, age-cohort differences in men's and women's experiences.
- Widening gender disparities throughout the period of career and family building, as early decisions (having a child, moving to part-time hours, leaving the workforce) result in the production and reproduction of gender, at home and at work.
- The outdatedness of taken-for-granted temporal templates developed for a typically (white) male workforce with full-time homemakers.

Changing life expectancies and life course sequences

Four historical trends — longer lifespans, uncertain retirement prospects and early retirement, the ageing of the large baby boom generation, and fertility decline — account for a remarkable change in the age structure of the workforce (Farnsworth-Riche, 2000; Moen, 2003a, 2003b). Moreover, there is a large — and growing — 'retired' force.

Our studies suggest the vast baby boom cohort will not accept being on the sidelines of society as they age. Those in the cohorts just preceding them confront uncertainty and ambivalence around retirement, often wanting to 'shift gears' rather than leave the workforce altogether (Kim & Moen, 2001a, 2001b; Moen & Fields, 2002; Moen, Plassmann, & Sweet, 2001). Evidence from these studies shows that many older workers and retirees want to continue to work, but in alternative arrangements, for example, in jobs that require fewer hours or in unpaid community service; others prefer retirement to be a gradual phased in process. None of these desires is met by current policies.

A life course approach to the ageing of the population points to the increasing irrelevance of the age-graded, lock-step sequence of first education, then continuous paid work, then the continuous 'leisure' of retirement. Consider, for instance, the educational system in American society. Contemporary school calendars remain grounded in the agrarian economy of the nineteenth century, a time when children were expected to help on the farm during the summer months. Even after industrialization, when not only men but single women, poor women, and especially women of colour were in the workforce, these agrarian-based arrangements tended

to work well because mothers, grandmothers, and neighbours were available to care for children before school, after school, and on summer vacations, as well as when they were sick, on 'snow' days, and for other exigencies. That is not the case now, as mothers, grandmothers, and neighbours themselves are likely to be in the workforce.

At the university level, most schooling is still designed for a 'young' clientele without job responsibilities, even though 40 per cent of students enrolled in colleges or universities are age 25 or older. Growing numbers of both men and women are returning to school as a path to shift careers or to continue educational career goals that have been interrupted by the demands of caring for children (Bradburn, Moen, & Dempster-McClain, 1996; Han & Moen, 1999a, 1999b; Sweet & Moen, 2003). These 'nontraditional' students face serious challenges managing the complexities of their work and family lives (Home, 1998; Settersten & Lovegreen, 1998).

Our evidence, along with the evidence of others (e.g. Bailyn, 1993; Bailyn, Rapoport, & Fletcher, 2000; Moen, 1994, 2003a, 2003b; Riley et al., 1994; Williams, 2000), has shown that the twenty-first century represents a time of mismatch, but also of systemic, albeit uneven and uncertain, change. Demographers use the concept 'cohort replacement' to describe transformations such as we are experiencing in the workforce, as younger workers (with new notions of work, life patterns, and possibilities) replace older workers (with more traditional beliefs and behaviour). But even older workers are out of step with the lock-step life course regime. In addition to the changing gender and age composition of the new workforce, there are other differences as well. Members of the twenty-first-century workforce are better educated, have fewer children on average than previous cohorts, and have children later in life. Many also are postponing marriage or are less likely to marry or stay married. Several scholars (e.g. Brines & Joyner, 1999; Clarkberg, 1999; Wilson, 1987) point out that marriage decisions are tied to the economic and job prospects of both men and women. And younger cohorts of women are more likely than ever to be employed, regardless of their family responsibilities, but with no fixed blueprint for their career track.

In sum, the matrix of current policies, cultural schema, and institutional practices is largely designed for a workforce that could fit the age-graded (and gendered) career template of continuous, full-time schooling, culminating in continuous, full-time (or more) employment for those serious about their jobs, ending in an abrupt transition into full-time, continuous retirement (Han & Moen, 1999a; Moen & Han, 2001; Williams & Han, 2003). Those not fitting this mould (now the majority of families, the majority of the workforce) most commonly experience this ill fit as personal troubles, a consequence of their own personal choices or failings. By contrast, a life course analysis underscores the historical construction of both the breadwinner-homemaker template and the lock-step template of first total education then total employment, then total retirement, as well as the shifting demography of the workforce and the shifting nature of the economy, all of which make the mismatches and cultural contradictions of contemporary life, and work, public issues, rather than merely private troubles.

A changing economy

In contrast to the American industrial economy of the middle of the twentieth century, today we have what has been characterized as an information economy, centred on services and the production of symbols (Reich, 1991). Yet contemporary ways of thinking about and measuring work remain better attuned with the technologies (i.e. the assembly line) and expanding economies more characteristic of the middle of the twentieth century not the beginning of the twenty-first. For example, an often shorthand index of productivity incorporates the amount of time a worker spends on the job, rather than the amount and quality of the work accomplished. So long as 'time at work' is the metric to assess productivity, so long as workplace and workforce policies remain tied to work hours, and in the absence of policies to the contrary, jobs will remain 'greedy institutions' requiring ever more of workers', and families', time (Bailyn & Harrington, 2004).

Several recent studies have sought to describe and explain trends in the number of hours that American men and women spend in employment, but, depending on the sources of data, frameworks of analysis, or populations studied, they yield contrasting visions (see review by Clarkberg & Merola, 2003). On the one hand, time diary data suggest an increase in *individuals'* leisure time, with corresponding declines in hours on the job (Robinson & Godbey, 1997). Other studies indicate a marked increase in time spent in paid and unpaid work, especially for women (Hochschild & Machung, 1989; Schor, 1991). Still other studies show no increase in the average working hours per person in the USA, but an important shift in the life cycle distributions of work hours since the mid-twentieth century, with men tending to reduce hours later in life and with an increase in the amount of paid work of women at midlife (McGrattan & Rogerson, 1998).

The life course perspective emphasizes the importance of considering linkages in lives. Although there is some debate over whether the amount of time individuals spend in the workplace has increased or decreased (e.g. Robinson & Godbey, 1997; Schor, 1991), when the couple is considered as a social unit there is little doubt that work hours — the combined efforts of the husband and the wife — have risen in dramatic ways over the past three decades (Clarkberg & Merola, 2003; Clarkberg & Moen, 2001; Jacobs & Gerson, 2001).

Our research indicates that most American workers are putting in more hours on the job than they would prefer (e.g. Clarkberg & Merola, 2003; Clarkberg & Moen, 2001; Moen & Sweet, 2002, 2003). A few trends suggest why. First, wages have not kept pace with living costs over the last 30 years. Second, in the contemporary 'downsizing' environment, neither job security nor the commitment and loyalty of workers can now be taken for granted. Accordingly, we find in our qualitative analysis that many workers try to 'signal' their personal investment in their jobs by working long hours, often including evenings and weekends. Third, and related, the most common reason the people we interviewed give for working long hours is that the job requires it. Downsizing and restructuring typically means requiring one's workforce to do more, even as their numbers shrink. Fourth, the ever-rising demand for consumer goods means that workers work more to earn more (Schor, 1998). Fifth, new information technologies mean that access anywhere, any time too often means worker availability everywhere, all the time. This fits well with Americans'

growing acceptance of a '24/7' workplace, responsive 24 hours a day, seven days a week. And finally, women's increasing labour force involvement has resulted in corresponding increases in their time spent at work, meaning that families devote more total hours to work now that both spouses have jobs.

Although most workers in our research say they would like to work fewer hours, there is an under-supply in the USA of 'good' part-time jobs (those with benefits and possibilities for advancement). Additionally, organizational cultures and job designs mandate that workers work beyond 'regular' full-time hours. We find working more than 45 hours a week generally reflects workplace constraints and demands rather than employee preferences. In contrast to many European countries, the USA offers workers very little in terms of job security, time off from work (either paid or unpaid), or the possibility of reducing work-hour commitments. The changing temporal and spatial boundaries of paid work emphasize first one historical and persisting boundary: the enormous chasm in the developed world between paid work and unpaid domestic work, with the latter unmentioned in most accounts of 'work', and invisible in both public and private sector labour force, economic, or social policies.

Life course scholars also focus on individual and family adaptive strategies to such boundaries, as well as the pervasiveness, across time and space, of paid work demands. Our studies underscore how dual-earner couples attempt to resolve the resulting time pressures by adapting their personal lives to fit the requirements of their jobs or career paths (for example, by delaying having a first or second or third child — see Altucher & Williams, 2003). Others (typically women) respond to their family needs by dropping out of the workforce for a time, or by working reduced hours. At the other end of the age spectrum, older workers who would like to work less, but are unable to do so, tend to retire from their primary career jobs if they can afford it. Taken together, the weight of our evidence suggests that the majority of workers struggle to fit their lives to a system that doesn't work well for them, and even though they may wish otherwise, continue working more hours than they would like (e.g. Moen & Han, 2001; Moen & Sweet, 2003; Roehling, Roehling, & Moen, 2001).

As Clarkberg and Merola (2003) find, the time-squeeze is largely a *family-level* phenomenon, and as both Pixley and Moen (2003) and Williams and Han (2003) show, so are occupational careers. What a life course perspective brings to both research and policy agendas is recognition of the fact that, as currently configured, occupational career building and family career building occur *simultaneously*, even though they are often studied, and legislated about, separately.

A life course lens reveals the *hidden infrastructure of time* (in the form of work hours and occupational career paths) which takes a severe toll in salaries, in occupational attainments and future prospects, in health insurance, in pensions, in paid time off and other benefits — to any deviations from the lock-step path of continuous, full-time (or more) work. Accordingly, we find that many middle-class, two-earner couples opt to reduce the family side of the work-family equation by having no or fewer children (Altucher & Williams, 2003), delaying marriage or parenthood, or leaving one marriage for another. Many also find that one partner must scale back on their career goals and/or work hours — with women disproportionately likely to do the scaling back (Becker & Moen, 1999; Han & Moen, 2001;

Moen & Han, 2001; Moen & Sweet, 2003; Williams & Han, 2003). And the vast numbers of workers moving toward retirement frequently find they have but two options: full-time (or more) work in their career occupations or full-time retirement, with few phased retirement options in between (Hutchens & Dentinger, 2003).

Summary: considering mismatches of gender, age, and economy together

Many of the problems confronting working families result from the failure to respond effectively to changes in gender and age demographics, life stage sequences, and the new contexts of work, all of which operate in concert to impede the fulfillment of work and family roles. Few employers or policy makers embrace the traditional *male breadwinner, female homemaker template*. Still, policy, practice, and expectations are grounded in this way of thinking about workers, paid work, and unpaid care work. So long as the life course is conceived as following *lock-step sequencing* (of first education, then [for men] continuous full-time employment, then the continuous full-time 'leisure' of retirement), we will fail to respond effectively to the experiences and needs of sizeable proportions of the workforce. Increases in longevity and the changing demography of the workforce, the rise of single-parent families and the ascendancy of the dual-earner couple as the new workforce and new family norm, a global, competitive economy are all producing remarkable *mismatches and cultural contradictions between today's realities and the existing rules of the career game* (see also Moen, 1994, 2003a; Riley, 1987; Riley et al., 1994). What are required are greater flexibilities in work hours, workweeks, work years, and the life course.

Reframing 'work–family', toward a 'flexible careers' research and policy agenda

A life course vantage point on the nature of the problem, the process, and the pay-offs of flexible work hours and flexible occupational career paths has implications for both research and policy agendas. A life course approach both broadens and deepens the ways 'work–family' or 'work–life' challenges are defined, studied, and hopefully resolved. In this section we suggest ways a life course approach can change the framing of scholarly inquiry, moving away from a binary, bifurcated view of 'work' vs. 'family' to a dynamic focus on a layered constellation of ever changing paid work and care work paths, perspectives, and prospects. These paths are, in turn, all embedded in a web of relationships, rules, and resources, filled with contradictions and mismatches. To better understand the value of a life course approach requires comparing it with the assumptions and methods of much of current 'work–family' theory and research, which tends to:

- Focus on outcomes, such as earnings, stress, conflict, or well-being, not processes.
- Focus on central tendencies, not variability.
- Assume the individual as decision maker, ignoring the fact that increasingly *couples* are making conjoint decisions.

- Assume that employee preferences and categories (such as 'full-time worker', 'part-time worker') are stable.
- Ignore complexity and heterogeneity of changing family, community, organizational, and policy environments.
- Ignore the multi-dimensions of the life course — that workers are also community members, citizens, parents, spouses, (adult) children of ageing parents, and even have interests and concerns beyond work or family.

And, most important:

- Ignore the institutionalized lock-step life course regime, the fact that age and gender-related patterns of work-hour, career, and life course organization are *socially constructed* and *socially sustained*.

A life course framing of research and policy agendas can demonstrate that: (1) simple assumptions about work–family 'balance' portray a very limited snapshot of a much more complicated, variegated, and dynamic phenomenon; (2) couples' multiple work–family adaptive strategies cannot be captured by examining individual experiences separately but require *couple-level analysis*; (3) work, family, community, and personal ties, demands, and resources shift over the life course *as do their meanings*; and (4) social, economic, technological, demographic, organizational, and political forces provide a backdrop of constraint, uncertainty, and risk as well as institutionalized norms, against which individuals and families make choices and experience the consequences of these choices.

The escalating strains on working families, as well as the realities of an ageing workforce, and the potential shortage of skilled workers, make it urgent that employers, unions, communities, and governments develop a *new workforce policy agenda* focusing on *flexibility*. Three outcomes are clear:

- Doing nothing to change inflexible work-hour and career expectations and policies makes workers with family responsibilities vulnerable to overload and burnout, places workers' productivity, family life, and the next generation increasingly at risk, and perpetuates existing gender divisions and inequalities.
- Doing nothing to respond to the changing nature and timing of retirement places growing numbers of Americans in the 50s and 60s out of the mainstream, depriving them of flexible work and income-generating opportunities, while depriving corporations and communities of their time and talents.
- Doing nothing to reshape federal and corporate policies and practices related to work hours and career paths will exacerbate any future labour shortage, offering workers with children or eldercare responsibilities, as well as those approaching retirement, few choices between full-time (or more) investment in paid work and none at all.

Although the challenges are great, we observe some signs of hope. For example, workers who are part of the baby boom generation (or the one just preceding it) are preparing for a different kind of retirement than that of their parents, typically doing more planning. In tandem with medical advances and lifestyle changes (such as less smoking) that are prolonging health and longevity, a new life stage may well emerge for those moving to and through the retirement transition, a stage we call *midcourse*.

This stage occurs midway between the early career (and family) building years and the fragility we associate with old age (Moen, 2003b; Moen & Fields, 2002). This new cohort of older (but not 'old' workers) holds perhaps the greatest promise for rewriting the lock-step career script and fostering a range of flexible options that challenge outdated work-hour rules, routines, and regulations. Most of these older Americans want to continue some form of employment, but do not want the long hours, inflexibilities, and workloads associated with their primary career jobs. We believe that new flexibilities will emerge to respond to their desires and needs to remain engaged, but in 'second acts' (Moen & Roehling, 2004). And these flexibilities will be welcomed by all members of the workforce, regardless of age or stage. Such structural leads creating innovative and flexible work-hour and career path policies — in the public sector, in the private sector, and in the two in partnership — will recognize and respond to the new workforce and new workplace realities.

Employers, communities, and governments *are* in the throes of reshaping (or at least beginning to recognize the need to reshape) the lock-step social organization of work hours, occupational careers, and the life course. The traditional occupational career script (based on the obsolete breadwinner–homemaker template and the disappearing social contract between workers and employers) is eroding. But workforce policy innovation, whether at community, corporate, organizational, state, or federal levels, is a *long-term and complicated project*. It requires far more than small changes around the edges of existing arrangements; but, rather, bold inventions reconfiguring prevailing assumptions and policies under-girding work hours, career paths, worker control, job design, reward structures, and benefits, along with the assumptions and policies under-girding specific public programmes. In the USA, for example, unemployment insurance remains tied to full-time work, social security promotes age graded exits (but not re-entry or reduced commitment) in the labour force, payroll taxes discourage part-time employment, and family leave remains unpaid and short. Unfortunately institutional-level change tends to occur at a glacial pace. Meanwhile, working families manage their jobs at work and at home and their relationships at home and at work as best they can, and older workers seek to fashion individual variations from the total work/total retirement lock-step arrangement.

These challenges point to both similarities and differences between the USA and other industrialized societies. European nations are also in transition, experiencing their own shifts in gender expectations, family configurations, ageing and early retirement. The USA is by no means unique in facing a changing workforce. But this country is unique among advanced industrial countries in its reluctance to forthrightly address in the policy arena the issues raised by the new workforce demographics. Most European countries, unlike the USA, do provide supports to women, parents, and families (in the form of children's allowances, maternity benefits, and paid parental leaves of absence) in addition to protections against unemployment (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2001).

European countries are also experimenting with more flexible and more limited work-hour expectations (France instituted a 35-hour workweek — but one which may be more flexible for employers than employees), and most have also devised a variety of exit strategies (such as disability pensions) around the retirement transition. Additionally, it is important to note that work-hour limitations in Europe are also

associated with rights to vacation time (e.g. France and Spain by law require 30 paid vacation days per year; the USA has no such requirement whatsoever [Robinson, 2000]). These European policies reflect: (1) economic concerns (such as flexibility for employers); (2) ideological convictions (about the importance of individual, family, and child welfare); and (3) pragmatic considerations (about unemployment and low birth rates). Note that European countries, in contrast to the USA, have had stricter immigration policies and therefore rely more on their own citizens to meet labour demands. Thus, their adoption of 'family-friendly' policies relates not only to concern with family well-being but also to labour market issues.

In contrast to the USA, work hours declined in Europe during the latter part of the twentieth century (Owen, 2001). The disparity between the yearly hours put in at work in the USA and Europe reflects the fact that both governments and employers in the USA have been notably reluctant to provide options, benefits, and services for America's changing workforce. We in the USA remain transfixed by our own myths about the power of the individual 'to make it', a Horatio Alger metaphor of moving up — by sheer effort, hard work, and putting in time — the ladder to occupational and economic success (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1985). But Horatio Alger's protagonists were without dependent care responsibilities, and the ladders they climbed actually led somewhere. Most workers today find no ladder, or else remain on the bottom rungs, or else find it resting upon a corporate foundation that may well crumble to the ground.

Conclusions: constructing — and reconstructing — careers and the life course

In Europe, the life course regime has been a function of the state, with educational, welfare, and labour policies providing exit and entry portals into and out of various roles at particular ages and in particular circumstances. European social security policies concerning risks (of poor health, lay offs, unemployment, childcare, ageing) have long been in place, providing support but also structuring the life course. In the USA, the life course regime is more a function of the market, as well as government regulations. Myriad private policies developed around hiring, firing, promotions, geographical mobility, occupational mobility, career paths, retirement, security, compensation, benefits, and opportunities which, in combination with related public regulations, create and perpetuate the hidden infrastructure of time that sustains the American life course regime. This means that the diffusion and institutionalization of inflexible (lock-step) policies and practices shape opportunities for schooling, paid work, economic security, discretionary time, civic engagement, and even the healthcare of individuals and their families over the life course. But despite their different historical developments, what we see in both Europe and North America are deeply rooted organizational and cultural practices that reify the lock-step life course: consisting of first full-time, uninterrupted education, then full-time, uninterrupted employment, then full-time, uninterrupted retirement. The difference is that, in Europe, family and personal transitions, as well as risks, are also incorporated into the life course regime, while, in the USA, the focus is almost exclusively on employment transitions and trajectories.

From our vantage point, the challenge to scholars as well as policy makers is clear: how do we move the discussion beyond ‘work–family balance’ to ways to reshape careers, the lock-step life course, and reward mechanisms? The answers, we believe, come in a range of flexible career templates that accommodate a range of timetables for both men and women. What is required, we argue, is that corporations, unions, and governments broaden the pool of options — work hours, workweeks, work years, and career paths — available to workers, men and women, at all ages and stages. What policies would be necessary to make this possible? In what ways could such flexible work-hour and career timing options reduce rather than exacerbate inequalities in life chances, life choices, and life quality? These research and policy challenges require new vantage points from which to view the ‘problem’ of ‘work–family’ and their potential solutions. We believe a dynamic, life course focus on: individual biographies, taken-for-granted cultural schema, institutionalized occupational and organizational regimes, and historical shifts in the realities of the contemporary workforce (and the growing ‘retired’ force) — as they could potentially come together in a renovated concept of ‘flexible careers’ — provide a fruitful way of framing and contextualizing the dynamics of ‘work’ and ‘family’ as they are played out in individual lives, in families, in communities, and in contemporary society.

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