From Work Trajectories to Negotiated Careers

The Contingent Work Life Course

WALTER R. HEINZ

OVERVIEW

In the social sciences work trajectories tend to be studied as careers which link individual participation histories in labor markets, occupations, and firms. Career models conceptualize the process of passing through socially defined pathways, but they neglect the mechanisms that connect these histories to biographical time and processes of social change (see Elder, Johnson, & Crosnoe, this volume). In this chapter, the work life course is regarded as a career, which is embedded in labor markets and organizations, and evolves through the interaction between social institutions and biographical actors. I argue that in post-industrial society there is an increasing emphasis upon personal decisions and responsibility in the shaping of the work life course, and a corresponding decline of normative age-markers for the timing and sequencing of labor market participation.

As a conceptual framework for the selection and presentation of the following themes, Gidden’s (1984) structuration theory is used. This theory proposes that there is a reciprocal relationship between social structure and individual agency over the life course. It implies that institutions are contributing to the structuring of social relations across time and space.

The following chapter is organized according to this basic idea. The work life course unfolds in the structural context of labor markets, occupations, and firms. It is constructed by
individuals via pathways and careers, which implies agency and socialization. Careers, in turn, are more or less regulated by social institutions, which mediate between labor markets, opportunities, types and sequences of work. Since the structuration of the work life course still differs by gender, the theme of coupled careers is introduced in order to illuminate that careers are not solo passages but are part of linked lives.

The chapter begins with a sketch of the major changes in work and their effects on the life course, with an emphasis on the economic turbulence during the last quarter of the 20th century. A discussion of the impact of labor market segmentation follows in order to clarify how occupations and organizations contribute to the distribution of life chances and the shaping of work histories. This discussion of social structures contextualizes research on the micro-social career processes that combine career experiences and socialization dynamics. Here, institutionalized pathways are contrasted with market-driven arrangements. These contexts condition the reciprocal effects of work conditions, job involvement, and personality over time. The process of self-socialization in flexible careers is described.

Then we look at the effects of institutionalized regulations and resources on employment sequences and discuss the consequences of the destandardization of pathways and contracts on careers. The way the gendered life course is implied in the structuration of coupled careers, on the levels of institutions and negotiations, is discussed next.

Finally, the contours of the contingent work life course, which emerges from negotiated careers, are outlined. Since the institutional approach to the analysis of work careers becomes most convincing with comparative data, examples derive from North America and Europe.

THE CHANGING LANDSCAPE OF WORK

In the last decade of the 20th century, the end of work (Rifkin, 1995), or the erosion of the work-centered life course (Beck, 1999), became a prominent topic in both the social sciences and the public debate. Empirical evidence shows that economic globalization, the decline of manufacturing jobs, the progress of information and communication technology, and waves of company restructuring had complex, partly contradictory effects on work careers (Tilly & Tilly, 1998). On the one side, continuous careers and stable employment are less certain and unemployment is rising because of more volatile and deregulated labor markets; on the other side, there are more employment opportunities for women, and risky options for self-employment and business start-ups. In post-industrial society, paid employment has not ceased to be the cornerstone of the life course; most people still spend their adult lives either working, qualifying themselves, or looking for work.

In industrial society, the work life course followed definite age and gender norms, status transitions, and ensuing role changes; the “normal biography” reflected the relative stability of cultural norms and social structures in the era of mass production. Over the 20th century, economic and political changes transformed the world of work. This century was an “age of extremes” (Hobsbawm, 1994), especially its second half; it was characterized by an ongoing decline of farming, a shift from manufacturing to services, increasing enrollment in post-secondary education, and women’s rising participation in the labor market. These social transformations have contributed to the growth of ever larger metropolitan regions; increasing travel time between home, work place, and shopping malls; and finally, to more flexible careers and a destandardized work life course.

The post-World War II years can be divided into a period of economic improvement with full (male) employment in North America and West Europe (around the 1960s)—a “Golden