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*Comparative research using a life course
approach in a cross-national study: research
design, case selection and interview methods*

Paper for the ESRC workshop **Comparative
Biographical Research**

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Overall research questions in TRANSITIONS

<http://www.workliferesearch.org/transitions/>

- Comparing the transition to parenthood in countries across Europe in a time of rapid workplace change
- Layers of context:
 - Country
 - Workplace
 - Gender and life course

Research Design

- Case study logic
- Life course perspective
- Biographical approach

Case study logic

- Selection of countries
- Selection of organisations
- Selection of interviewees

Selection of countries

- Variation in historical development on dimensions relating to the
 - Political
 - Economic
 - Social

Typologies of countries

- Northern Europe: *UK, Netherlands, Norway, Sweden*
 - Stable political regimes
 - Neo-liberal economic policies
 - Welfare states; large public sectors
 - Two income families replaced male breadwinner model

Typologies of countries

- Southern Europe: *Portugal*
 - From dictatorship to democracy
 - Small public sector
 - Low welfare state spending
 - Male breadwinner model gradually giving way to two-income families

Typologies of countries

- Eastern Europe: *Bulgaria and Slovenia*
 - From state control to market and democracy
 - Privatisation of public sector
 - Cuts in state support /introduction of welfare
 - Long history of two income households

Workplace

- Private sector: Finance, insurance, multinational companies (Norway, UK, Netherlands, Portugal, Bulgaria and Slovenia)
- Public sector: Social services (Norway, UK, Sweden, Portugal, Bulgaria)

New mothers and fathers

- Birth cohorts: 1965-75
- All levels in the organisations
- Variation in social class and education
- Two parents and lone parent households
- Variation in life course patterns depending on the timing of transitions and events

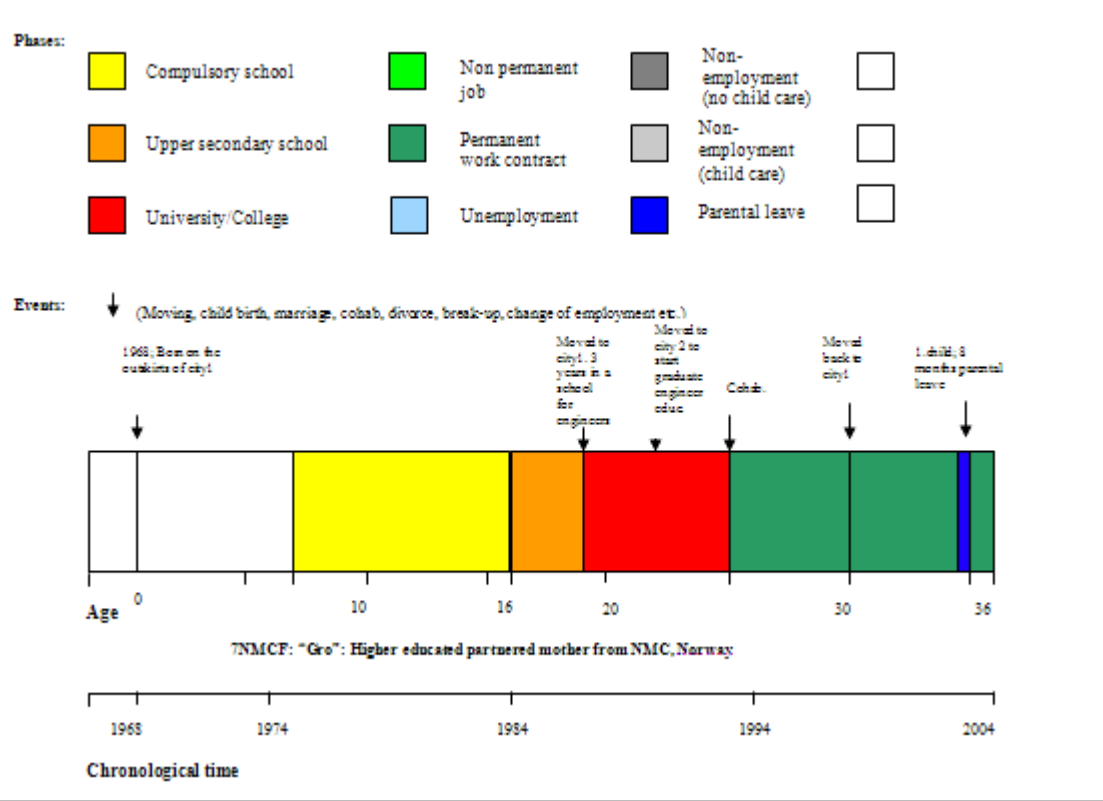
Multi-method research strategy: multiple data sets

- Official statistics (national level)
- Documentation from organisations
- Manager interviews
- Focus groups
- Individual interviews
- Life lines

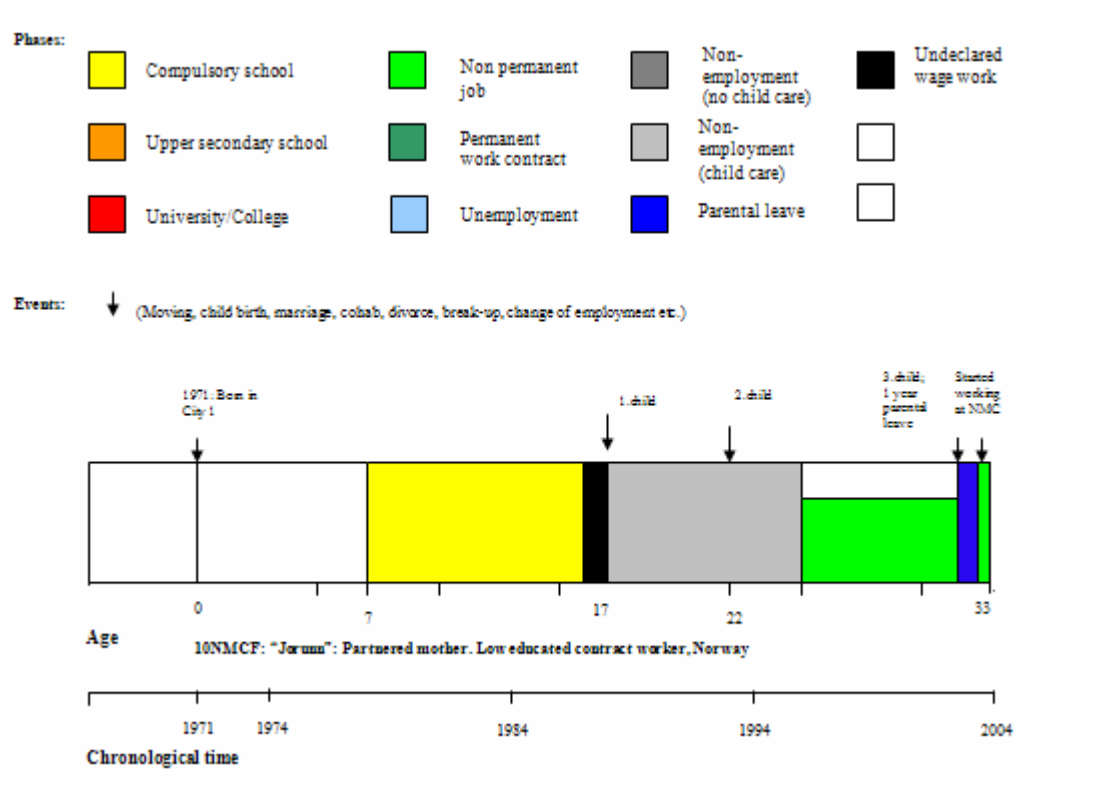
A Life Course Perspective

- Timing of key events in the life course in relation to
 - The cohort s/he belongs to
 - The overall conditions in the historical period the life is lived; the structural context of the society and the person's gender and social class etc

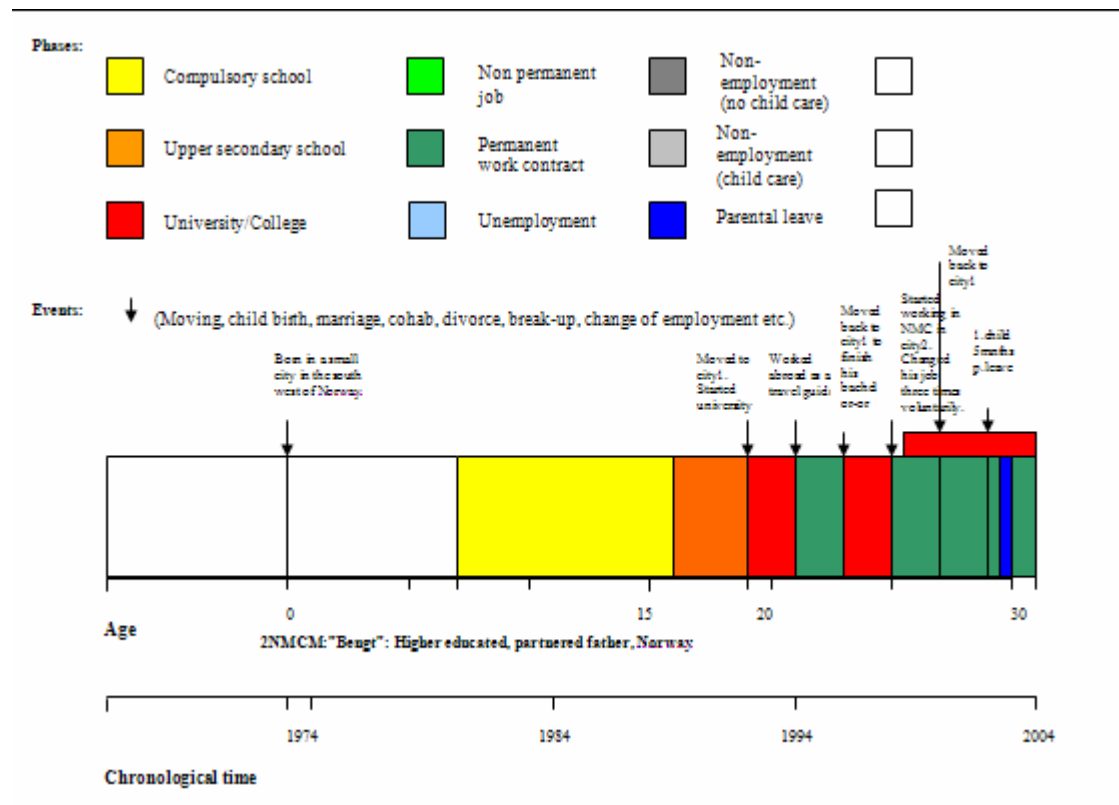
Example of life line 1: Norwegian private sector mother higher education



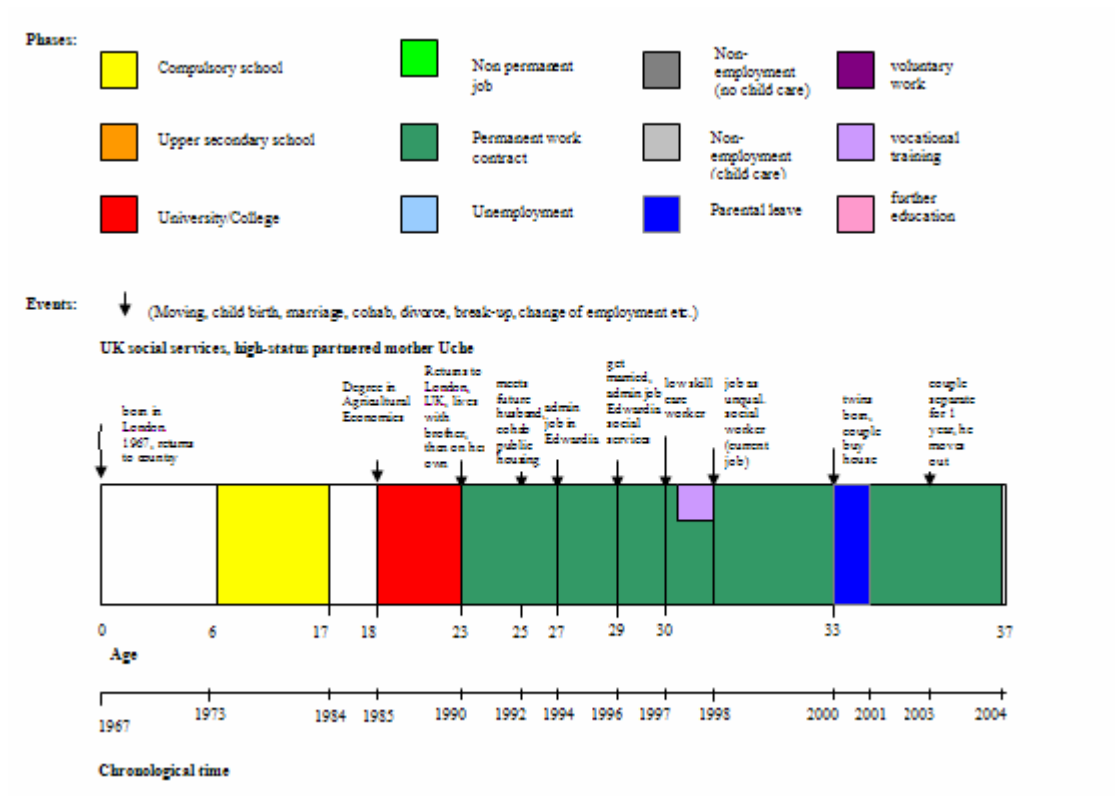
Example of life line 2: Norwegian private sector mother lower education



Example of life line 3: Norwegian private sector father higher education



Example of life line 4: UK SS mother middle education



Individual interviews

- Biographical approach
 - Biography: *A story told in **the present** about events and experiences in a person's **past** and her/his expectations for **the future***

Case selection and analysis: national teams

Life course analysis

- To judge own data by national data for example national average of timing of parenthood in the life course
- To assess timing of life course transitions of individuals in relation to other transitions (life lines)

Cases selected to maximise contrasts *within* countries

Case selection and analysis: national teams

Biographical-interpretive approach

- Interviews: How life course transitions are interpreted and talked about by the interviewee
- How different layers of context are made relevant in the interviews, particularly with reference to the transition to parenthood
- Attention to the 'silent discourses'
- Case material selected from national reports

Case selection and analysis: Cross-national analysis (Consolidated Interview Report)

- Comparing cases of countries by typologies
- Selection of cases by contrasts in life course patterns (life course analysis)
- Interview text selection based on national reports and reference made to teams
- Other material: national organisational reports and consolidated reports from earlier phases of the study

Biographical data in cross-national comparisons

- *Whenever [life stories] are used for probing subjectivities, life story interviews prove able to probe deep; perhaps because it is much easier to lie about one's opinions, values and even behaviour than about one's own life. It is this specific quality of life stories, the wealth and complexity of the descriptions they bring forth of personal experiences, that give them value for sociological research and that would make them useful for comparative purposes. But to extract the wealth of sociological meanings latent in life stories is no easy task. Most of them remain implicit in a person's lived experience; it takes a sociological eye – some lay persons do possess it – to look through a particular experience and understand what is universal in it; to perceive, beyond described actions and interactions, the implicit sets of rules and norms, the underlying situations, processes and contradictions that have both made actions and interactions possible and that have shaped them in specific ways. It takes some training to hear, behind the solo of a human voice, the music of society and culture in the background. This music is all the more audible if, in conducting the interview, in asking the very first question, in choosing, even earlier, the right persons for interviewing, one has worked with sociological issues and riddles in mind (Bertaux, D. 1990 "Oral History Approaches to an International Social Movement" in E. Öyen (ed.) *Comparative Methodology*, London: Sage.pp. 167-168).*

Representativeness

- A case as 'a case of what'?
- The relationship between research questions and case selection in different phases of a study

Logic of case selection for Consolidated Report

- Cases of countries based on typologies
- Cases of mothers and fathers to *contrast* and *compare* across countries
- Cases that highlight the history-biography dynamic

References Transitions Reports

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Consolidated reports

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Fagnani et al (eds) *Transitions Research Report # 2 (2004) Context Mapping* for the EU Framework 5 funded study “Gender, parenthood and the changing European workplace” Printed by the Manchester Metropolitan University: Research Institute for Health and Social Change.

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