

# Changing life courses of women: How do German baby boomers differ from older cohorts

Julia Simonson, Laura Romeu Gordo & Nadiya Titova

German Centre of Gerontology (DZA), Berlin

## Summary

**Purpose:** Male and female biographies differ significantly even if in the last century labour participation of women has increased. Female biographies are still often characterized by the combination of family and work.

This double burden not only appears in diverging career opportunities and income levels, but also leads, together with the work oriented pension system in Germany, to large differences in pension benefits (Rasner, 2006). Life courses – especially employment and family biographies – have implications for the way life is structured in old age. The material situation of retirees is to a large degree the result of employment biographies in previous life phases and is made up of the sum of advance contributions into the statutory pension insurance scheme, contributions to company pension schemes and private savings.

**Method:** We examine how biographies of German women from the cohort of the baby boomers (1956-1965) have altered in comparison to older cohorts (1936-1945 and 1946-1955). Therefore, we carry out sequence analyses, based on longitudinal data from the German Socio Economic Panel (SOEP). Grounded on the sequences we consider clusters to identify typical biographies of the three cohorts.

**Results:** The analyses reveal that there have been changes in female life courses. On the one hand there is an increasing labor participation of women. On the other hand biographies of younger cohorts have become more diverse, which both might have consequences for prospective pension entitlements.

## Research Questions

How do biographies of German women from the cohort of the baby boomers (1956-1965) have altered in comparison to older cohorts?

- Are female biographies becoming more inhomogeneous and plural?
- Do younger cohorts find new ways to combine employment and family responsibilities, in particular due to increasing part time work?

## Method

Data come from the German Socio Economic Panel (SOEP), a nationally representative household study. Here, analyses are based on a pooled longitudinal dataset including SOEP-data from 1984 to 2007.

Life courses of 7.596 women, aged 16 to 45, are investigated, whereby women belong to three birth cohorts:

- 1936-1945 (n=2.400)
- 1946-1955 (n=2.386)
- 1956-1965 (n=2.810)

5.536 women come from West Germany, 2.060 from East Germany.

Life courses are analyzed by methods of sequence analysis and optimal matching (Brzinsky-Fay, Kohler & Luniak, 2006).

Grounded on the distance matrix of the sequences a hierarchical cluster analysis is calculated to identify typical biographies of the three cohorts.

## Results

Compared to older cohorts, women of the baby boomer cohort spend less time in their life course being a housewife. Other times lengthened, in particular the duration of education and apprenticeship, likewise the length of unemployment.

The duration of full time employment decreased slightly, but this might be an effect of the overall shortened length of the sequences as well as of the longer education times in younger cohorts.

The diversity of life courses has grown steadily from cohort to cohort: In the oldest cohort, 72 percent of the life courses differ from each other. In the middle cohort, 84 percent of the sequences differ, and in the youngest cohort heterogeneity has risen to 94 percent. This can be interpreted as prima facie evidence for pluralization.

Apart from that, inhomogeneity within the life courses has increased as well: Both the average number of different states and the number of episodes per sequence has risen, which means life courses are becoming more changeful.

The cluster analysis of the sequences produced three clusters (based on the elbow criterion). The first cluster is dominated by full time work. In the first cohort 40 percent of the women belong to this cluster, in the second cohort the percentage has increased to 47 percent. In the third cohort 45 percent belong to this cluster. The second cluster is characterized by long periods of part time employment. This cluster gets more salient in the younger cohorts.

Women in the last cluster typically have biographies with long episodes as housewives. This cluster becomes less important over time.

Moreover, there is the well-known finding (eg. Rosenfeld, Trappe & Gornick) that life course patterns of women from East and West Germany differ considerably.

Beyond the changes in the cluster affiliations, the compositions of the clusters change over the cohorts, becoming more heterogeneous.

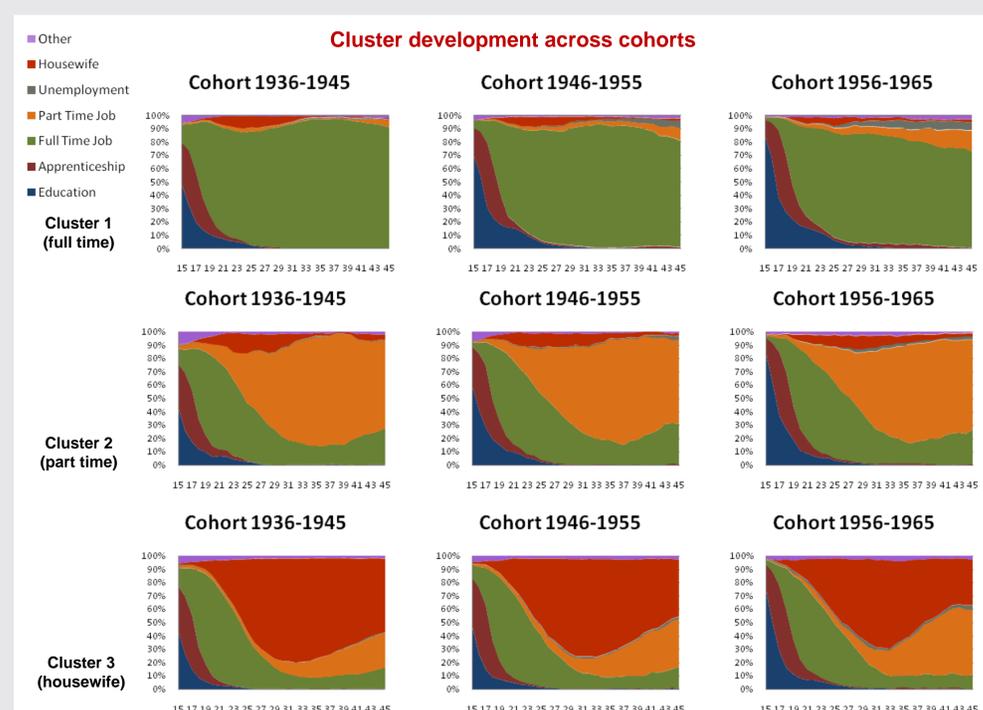
	Average durations (in years)		
	Cohort 1 1936-1945	Cohort 2 1946-1955	Cohort 3 1956-1965
Education	1,31	2,11	3,00
Apprenticeship	1,63	1,91	2,19
Full time job	15,13	14,88	13,02
Part time job	3,89	4,53	5,06
Unemployment	0,08	0,33	0,63
Housewife	8,12	5,48	4,03
Other	0,64	0,67	0,56
All	30,80	29,94	28,50

	Plurality and inhomogeneity of sequences		
	Cohort 1 1936-1945	Cohort 2 1946-1955	Cohort 3 1956-1965
Percentage of different sequences	72,08	83,86	93,84
Different states per sequence	3,14	3,50	4,11
Episodes per sequence	3,68	4,36	5,55

Cluster	Cluster affiliations (in percent)		
	Cohort 1 1936-45	Cohort 2 1946-55	Cohort 3 1956-65
Cluster 1 (full time)			
West	29,27	35,98	35,61
East	78,28	84,31	76,96
All	39,64	46,55	45,37
Cluster 2 (part time)			
West	13,70	21,94	25,74
East	13,10	11,66	18,63
All	13,58	19,69	24,06
Cluster 3 (housewife)			
West	57,03	42,08	38,65
East	8,64	4,03	4,41
All	46,78	33,76	30,57

In all cohorts East German women belong much more often to the full time cluster and less often to the housewives cluster than women from West Germany.

From cohort to cohort, part time work becomes more important in the housewives cluster and the full time cluster. Times for education rise in all clusters.



## Discussion

### Main Results:

- Less women with 'typical housewife biographies'
- More active women in the labour market (especially in form of part time participation)
- More heterogeneity in the biographies (especially 'typical housewife biographies' are increasingly less continuous)

### Potential implications for old age provision:

- Increase in labour market participation can improve women's old age provision due to higher contributions to the public system and higher private savings.
- More heterogeneity in the biographies can have diverse impacts in old age provision of women.
- Concentrating in housewife biographies, lower continuity due to labour participation breaks could lead to higher contributions in the public pension system.

**Summarizing,** women biographies have been changing in the last decades. Labour participation has increased significantly, implying that women have to find possibilities in order to combine the double burden of work and family. This is reflected for example in the increase of part time work and reduction of inactivity in the family formation years. Even for women who have a biography marked by labour market inactivity ('typical housewife biographies') we observe changes. These biographies become more heterogeneous and we even observe an increase in labour market participation of 'housewives' after the main family formation years. These developments in female biographies can have positive effects on the old age provision of women.

## References

- Brzinsky-Fay, C., Kohler, U. & Luniak, M. (2006). Sequence analysis with Stata. *The Stata Journal*. 6(4), 435-460.
- Rasner, A. (2006). Das Konzept der geschlechtsspezifischen Rentenlücke [Conceptualizing the gender pension gap]. *DRV-Schriften* 55, 270-284.
- Rosenfeld R., Trappe, H. & Gornick, J. (2004). Gender and work in Germany: Before and after reunification. *Annu. Rev. Sociol.* 30, 103-124.

## Further Information

Contact: julia.simonson@dza.de  
Information: www.dza.de