PRINCIPLES AND PROSPECTS OF THE LIFE COURSE PARADIGM

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In recent years, the scientific interest of many demographers has shifted from studying "demographic regimes" and large-scale processes to analysing longitudinal micro data in the form of "life courses". By some of its advocates, the "life course approach" is heralded as a new paradigm capable of reinvigorating the study of populations. Since, ultimately, demography deals with the fates and choices of individuals, the micro level is optimally suited to study chains of causation. Thus, according to the supporters of the life course, demography no longer has to make do with the second-best option of aggregate data on the meso or macro level. Moreover, no longer is demography limited to studying snapshots of births, marriages and deaths. Instead, it will be able to analyse processes of family formation and well-being that span life times and can even be followed across generations. New strategies of data collecting and data sharing, as well as new statistical techniques have opened up vistas of research that will reshape demography's landscape.

Has this vision appeal for historical demographers as well? Are life courses—basically standardized biographies—really different from the traditional tool of family reconstitution? Are the new techniques capable of changing scholarly practices in historical demography? To what extent is the life course adopted in historical demography, what results have been reaped and what kind of obstacles can be perceived? In this paper, I will discuss the life course approach in terms of its theoretical claims, its methodological practice, and the kind of results it tends to produce. In the next section, I will introduce the approach and discuss basic concepts and principles. Then, I will discuss whether its application in the field of historical demography indeed can be seen as a paradigmatic shift. A short survey of recent literature will serve to illustrate the current practice of life course demography. Does this research live up to the expectations of life course theorists? If not, does this result from problems with the theory itself, from the current state of statistical methods, or from the inadequacy of historical data? In the remainder of the paper I will discuss the potential pitfalls and try to come up with solutions and recommendations. If the life course approach is indeed potentially capable of both rejuvenating historical demography and linking this field to ongoing scientific debates, what needs to be done?

WHAT IS THE LIFE COURSE APPROACH?

In the social sciences, the systematic study of life courses has been inspired by the life history techniques that were developed by W. I. Thomas and F. Znaniecki, who studied the lives of immigrant Polish peasants in the United States (Thomas and Znaniecki, 1918-1920). In the Chicago-school of sociology these techniques were popular, especially in the study of deviant behaviour. In the 1950's and 1960's, when the social sciences fell under the spell of functionalism, the analysis of biographies lost its attraction. From the 1970's, however, dissatisfaction rose with main-stream sociology's a-historical study of societal structures on the basis of aggregated data. Renewed interest in historical developments and in the complex interaction between individual lives and social processes led to a revival of the life history approach. However, this did not entail a rejection of quantitative analysis. On the contrary, new statistical techniques have been developed which enable life patterns of large numbers of people to be analysed.

The life course approach is essentially a heuristic device to study the interaction between individual lives and social change. It is a way of conceptualizing lives within the contexts of families, society and historical time. The *life course* can be defined as the sequence of positions of a particular person in the course of time. A position can be either marital status, parenthood, employment, residence in a particular location etcetera. A life course analysis studies the frequencies and the timing of changes in positions, generally of groups such as birth cohorts. These changes are called *events* or *transitions*. Every life course is characterized by a sequence and combination of transitions, such as leaving home, finding work, finding a partner and becoming a parent. Such sequences of roles or statuses are named *trajectories*, whereas the time between transitions is known as *duration*. To a large extent people follow in their life normative patterns regarding the proper behaviour at a given age and the proper sequence of transitions (e.g. education followed by starting employment followed by marriage followed by parenthood). Such "standard" patterns are known as *social pathways* or cultural scripts (Elder *et al.*, 2003; Liefbroer and Dykstra, 2000). These—often gender-specific—pathways are not only shaped by ethical prescriptions and cultural preferences but have also been institutionalised by the regulations of the modern welfare state (education, old-age pensions etc.) (Mayer, 1991; Nave-Herz, 1991). However, they change continually as the shifts in aggregate life course patterns of subsequent birth cohorts testify (Liefbroer and Dykstra, 2000). Finally, *turning points* denote a substantial change in the direction of one's life, and can be determined either subjectively or objectively (Hareven, 2000, 153, 329).

According to its advocates, the life course "provides a framework for studying phenomena at the nexus of social pathways, developmental trajectories, and social change" (Elder *et al.*, 2003, 10). Thus, its most ambitious claim is that it can unearth the interactions and intersections between the micro level of individuals and the macro levels of culture, economy, social policy etcetera. How is this claim substantiated? To understand how life course analysis

operates, five principles are essential (Elder *et al.*, 2003, 1) *Life-Span development.* The principle of life-span Development claims that we can only understand choices and behaviour by taking into account experiences in earlier stages of life. The life course is a cumulative process and should therefore be studied as a whole. 2) *Agency.* Life course theory acknowledges that people determine—within given constraints and opportunities—their own life course. In other words, we cannot fully understand behaviour without taking account of the scope, the effectiveness and the direction of individual life plans. Thus, in considering agency, we need to distinguish between *long-range life plans* (Hareven, 1982), short-term tactical reconsiderations and the kind of decision making geared at sheer survival. 3) *Time and place.* This principle simply states that individuals and birth cohorts are influenced strongly by historical context and specific location. Due to historical change, every birth cohort has a unique set of constraints and opportunities that shapes the courses of its lives. Life course analysis is devoted to studying the interaction between life courses and demographic, economic, institutional and cultural changes. 4) *Timing.* The impact of individual experiences and historical events on the subsequent life course depends to a large extent on their timing. That is, at what specific age does a particular transition (or combination of transitions) occur? Much attention goes to the interaction of different forms of time: the time of the individual (age), of the family (stage in the family cycle) and historical time (economic cycles, social changes). 5) *Linked lives.* This principle emphasizes that life courses are interdependent with others. This is particularly salient in the context of families. Transitions of certain family members such as leaving home have immediate ramifications for the others. To some extent, the temporal associations between transitions of family members result from, and thus reveal, coordination within families or households. In the words of Modell and Hareven: "The examination of timing can, at least, provide insights into internal processes of family decision making". (Modell and Hareven, 1978; see also Hareven, 2000).

It is clear from these principles that the life course approach is highly holistic in its aspiration to grasp the behaviour of individuals within their personal networks and within their specific place, historical time and society. The strong emphasis laid on time, path dependency and contextuality qualifies the life course approach as an essentially *historical* method. Thus, in theory, it should be highly relevant for family history and historical demography.

A NEW PARADIGM FOR HISTORICAL DEMOGRAPHY?

According to various scholars, the life course approach is not merely an addition to the historical demographer's toolbox, it signifies nothing less than a change of paradigm. In principle, it is capable of superseding the dominant paradigm of "pure state" demography (Courgeau, 2000; Courgeau and Lelièvre, 1999; Willekens, 1999). Demographers commonly study only one phenomenon at the time in "homogeneous populations", that is populations whose relevant characteristics are supposed to remain constant in the period of observation. For instance, one

studies the frequency of marriage of rural men in a particular region in a particular period. The assumptions underlying this approach are often taken for granted. Thus, people who are removed from the population, e.g. through migration, are supposed to have the same behaviour towards marriage as people still remaining or entering through migration. Also, alternative (*competing*) events, in this case cohabitation, are not taken into account. Complex processes such as partner selection and family formation are often simplified in order to study them in their "pure state". Finally, to assure homogeneity, researchers often revert to creating small subpopulations (e.g. sons of wealthy farmers) that do not allow for significance tests. In reality, people constantly move from one "subpopulation" to another, they shift from urban to rural places, they change occupational positions, wealth and status groups and even alter their religious denomination. It is unrealistic to assume that the behaviour of individuals in a new group immediately converges to the group average and that their previous experiences are no longer relevant. The life course approach is devised precisely to deal with the ongoing impact of past experiences (principle of Life-Span Development) in constantly changing contexts (Principle of Time and Place). Moreover, event history analysis, the statistical technique most appropriate to the life course method, can deal with both the problem of selection by loss from observation and the reality of heterogeneity in any population, however small (see below).

Another problem that traditionally besets historical demography is the risk of "ecological fallacy". This means that inferences about behavioral propensities of individuals are based solely upon aggregate statistics collected for the group to which those individuals belong (Robinson, 1950; Courgeau and Baccaïni, 1998). For instance, hypotheses with respect to the effect of religion on fertility are often based on associations of (marital) fertility and religious composition of the population measured at the municipal or regional level (Haan, 2005). In theory, however, the correlation of e.g. catholicism with high fertilty may be explained by a third, as yet unknown, factor.

To some extent, historical demographers have already made the "micro" turn long ago, by creating family reconstitutions at the level of one or several villages. However, these reconstitutions were often based solely on the records of baptism, marriages and burials, thus having little information on unmarried persons and childless couples. In addition, the prevailing techniques did not allow for integrating the experiences of people who either entered or left observation through migration. In general, neither destinies nor personal networks beyond the confines of the village were taken into account (for some exceptions see Reay, 1996; Noordam, 1986). The life course approach aspires to overcome all these limitations.

Several statistical techniques are particularly suited for the life course approach. These techniques put *time*—individual age as well as chronological time—into the centre of the analysis. Of special importance is *event history analysis* in which the dependent variable is the length of time that elapses until a transition from one state to the next occurs, such as non-married to married or employed to unemployed. The condition for this method is that the exact date of the transitions are known. The rates of

occurrence of these transitions can be calculated as hazard rates in life tables that incorporate the information on persons who leave the observation (e.g. through death or migration). "Proportional hazard" models combine the strengths of life tables and regression analysis. The parameter estimates of the models assess the risks of a particular transition, and the ratio of two risks is called the relative risk. The statistical significance of individual coefficients can be determined by t tests, whereas tests for the overall significance of a particular model can be made using likelihood ratio statistics (Ritschard and Oris, 2005; Allison, 1984; Yamaguchi, 1991; Blossfeld and Rohwer, 1995). In the past decades, these models have been applied frequently in historical demography, in particular in the context of life course research (Alter, 1988; Alter, 1998).

To sum up, the life course approach and its methodological translation in event history analysis promises a shift from the study of simplified single events to the study of *processes*. To paraphrase Hobcraft (2006): historical demography can now move from the study of births to the process of parenthood, from marriages and divorces to partnership, from deaths to the process of well-being, from migrations to the life-long shifts of positions and, finally, from household structures to networks of kin and friends. To what extent does current research in historical demography live up to this promise?

EXPLORATIONS OF LIFE COURSE HISTORY

Within the scope of this paper, only a brief and highly incomplete survey can be made of the life course approach's inroads in historical demography.

Not surprisingly, life course theory and (statistical) methodology have been applied most fruitfully in the field of family history that seems to have undergone a true revitalization. Based on the principle of linked lives, short and long term effects of the family situation on the life course have been studied. Following the principle of life span development, much attention has been given to the impact of working and residential experiences of adolescents for their choices in later life: choices regarding partner selection, geographical and social mobility.

Traditional demographic history was focussed –through the concept of the "family cycle"–on the study of "normal" family formation and "normal" reproduction (Hareven, 1978). It tended to ignore or relegate to the margins the experiences of unwed mothers and their children, of foundlings and orphans, of cohabiting couples and of permanent celibates. In the "new" family history, these issues are studied afresh. With the aid of event history analysis, researchers tackle, for instance, the question of the surmortality of illegitimate children. Why was single motherhood so detrimental for the survival of their children? Has this to do with their social isolation (e.g. as recent immigrants), their work and incapacity to breastfeed their children, or did the stigma of illegitimacy induce infanticide (Van Poppel, Kok and Kruse, 1997)? What do the residential histories of the children (e.g. their being taken care of by the grandparents) reveal about illegitimacy as such (Blaikie, 1993; Brändström, 1996)? Even less is known about the backgrounds (legitimate or illegitimate) and fate of foundlings (e.g. Kertzer, Koball and White, 1997; Kertzer and Sigle, 1998; Brunet, 2002; Levene,

2003). In the early nineteenth century, child abandonment was very common in several European countries but its implications still have to be translated in terms of the hypotheses on Western European marriage patterns and reproduction. Permanent celibacy, although well integrated in Hajnalian theory, has hardly been studied with respect to specific family backgrounds, the relationship with delayed marriage (Engelen and Kok, 2003), and residential and career choices of the celibates themselves (Dorsman and Stavenuiter, 1993; Capron and Oris, 2000 ; Alter and Capron, 2004).

The topic of the circulation of working adolescents among households has also been relatively understudied in traditional historical demography, although this circulation was highly relevant for the functioning of nuclear and stem family systems and was intrinsic to the delayed marriage found in large parts of western Europe (Hajnal, 1982). This lack of interest can be explained from the fact that, apart from the typical snapshots of households found in censuses, mobile adolescents are not visible in records of baptisms, marriage and burials. In addition, their circular mobility made no impression on regional net migrations flows. However, there are many pertinent questions about this facet of European history. How did the mobility of individual youths relate to both their parental household composition and that of their employers? Were they expelled or retained at home during economically bad periods? Is the background of the parents (e.g. their migration history) relevant for the destinations of their children? Is the experience of servant girls in urban households translated in their later geographical

mobility and partner choice? Recently, a whole new literature on the subject of leaving home and servant mobility has sprung up, often directly working with notions from the life course paradigm (e.g. Van Poppel, Oris and Lee, 2004; Fauve-Chamoux, 2004; Bras, 2004; Dribe and Lundh, 2005).

Family dynamics form the core of demographic history inspired by the life course paradigm. By linking current household composition to mortality in different stages of life, patterns of internal redistribution of food submerge, as well as differential protection in times of economic stress, the power relations between generations and sexes et cetera. This type of research is particularly fruitful when families systems can be compared. What does differential mortality tell us about gender equality, generational hierarchy and protection in nuclear, stem and complex households. How vulnerable are members of different family systems in times of severe economic stress? In the study *Life Under Pressure* (Bengtsson, Campbell and Lee, 2004) these issues are tackled with event history techniques that enable analysis of the impact of fluctuations in food prices. The study has revealed that gender and age discrimination affected mortality in the West as much as in the East of the Euasian continent. In addition, local variation proved to be more important for mortality than expected, which suggests that local traditions and systems of care were of great importance.

A related topic concerns the fate of widows and orphaned children. The "nuclear hardship" hypothesis suggests that in nuclear family systems the "victims" were thrown back upon collective care arrangements, such as charity (Laslett, 1988). Did widows and

orphans fare better in non-nuclear systems, such as the stem families of southern Europe and Japan, or the multiple-family households in China? A recent volume edited by Derosas and Oris (2002) addresses this question. For Italy, Breschi and Manfredini (2002) show that widows were, indeed, better off when they lived in a complex house-hold. On the other hand, the ties between parents and children as well as relations with more distant kin were stronger and more effective than Laslett has supposed. In eastern Belgium, the effects of the father's death on the mother's survival were reduced greatly when adolescent children were present in the household. In the agrarian village of Sart, the presence of sons was of crucial importance, but in the industrial town of Tilleur it was the daughters who stayed to help their mother (Alter *et al.*, 2002). Also, kin living in the commu-nity significantly decreased the widow's risk of dying. As in Italy, complex households in China offered protection to widows. The more adult men were living in the household, the better her chances of survival. However, the value put on male offspring implied that a widow would be treated much better if she had a son. On the other hand, sons without a mother had a rough time when their aunts were living in the same household. Apparently, aunts managed to divert family resources to their own children. This finding puts the patriar-chal nature of the Chinese family into perspective. As Campbell and Lee put it: "Fathers could not care for their sons, in the face of competing mothers." (Campbell and Lee, 2002, 322).

Presently, the impact of the composi-tion of the parental household on the subsequent life course is being explored in fields as diverse as marriage (e.g. Neven, 2005), social mobility (e.g. Van Poppel, De Jong and Liefbroer, 1998; Van Bavel, 2005) and mortality in later life (e.g. Bengtsson and Lindstrom, 2000). Also, a whole new research fields is emerging devoted to studying sibling differentials in life destinies (e.g. Barrera-Gonzalez, 1992; Adams and Kasakoff, 1992; Oris *et al.*, 2007; Bras and Neven, 2007). Under what condi-tions do destinies differ strongly between one child and the other? Clearly, inheritance practices related to different family types are particularly relevant for this kind of questions (e.g. Fauve-Chamoux and Arrizabalaga, 2005; Augustins, 2002). How did marriage, reproduction, occupational career and residential trajectories vary between heirs and non-heirs (Florey and Guest, 1988; Bonnain, 1996)? On the other hand, what kind of assistance did siblings offer one another during the life course, eg. by cohabiting (Perrier, 2000; Oris, Ritschard and Ryczkowska, 2005)? There is still much we need to know about how families in the past actually functioned. However exciting the new research is turning out, the emphasis is still very strong on household composi-tion, whereas much less is known on the quality and character of relations between family members and on family resources in terms of economic and social capital (networks) (Uhlenberg and Mueller, 2003, 127). There is much to be gained from a closer cooperation with qualitative family history, a point we will return to shortly.

The life course approach is clearly able to enrich family history with a host of new or previously disregarded research topics. But is it also able to direct histor-ical demography towards issues that

rank high in current debates of social scientists and social policy makers? I refer here to concerns with ageing, migration and integration, and demographic transition.

Ageing

In social gerontology, the life course approach is very much *en vogue*. Special courses, journals and even research institutes are devoted to study the process of ageing with life course concepts. Clearly, these concepts are helpful to reveal how the current situation of the elderly is related to past choices, to changes in their social networks and in the surrounding society (e.g. Settersten, 2002). Historical demographers can add a long-term perspective to gerontology by studying the trajectories, living arrangements and health of old people in past times. What was the role of children, siblings and other kin in caring for the elderly in the past? How did the elderly preserve their independence and at what costs? Did they benefit from their savings in the past? How do life course patterns of the aged vary between regions with different family systems and with collective care arrangements? Surprisingly, historical demographers have not flocked to this field, although interest is growing (Bulder, 1993; Bourdelais, 1999; Neven, 2002; Thane, 2003; Van Poppel and Liefbroer, 2005).

Migration

Of all demographic variables, migration is the "Cinderella", the least known in both population studies and historical demography (Oris, 2003, 189). The focus of migration studies has been on long-distance and international migration flows. The traditional approach was to explain these flows from a comparison of (expected) employment and income in the sending and receiving areas. This "push and pull" type of explanation did not account for the intense circulation between rural regions or the temporary moves to cities. Moreover, migration theorists have increasingly become aware that individual acts of migration engender new moves. This principle of "cumulative causation" is becoming one of the dominant approaches in migration studies (Massey *et al.*, 1993). People who have migrated once are more likely than others to do so in the future. Also, people who are related to persons with migration experience, may receive information or practical help that lowers their own costs of moving. These "chains" also operates at the level of communities: villages in which many people have left are likely to lose even more. Thus, migration decisions of individuals are related to their past experience, the experience of others, and the changes in their local context. Clearly, the life course principles of Life Span Development, Linked Lives, and Time and Place are highly applicable to this type of migration studies. We still know very little about the moves people made during their lives and how these moves were related to other life course transitions. Who were the typical "repeaters" and what explains their behaviour? Gradually, a new historical research field emerges that analyses individual migration trajectories including intralocal moves (e.g. Pooley and Turnbull, 1998; Bras, 2002; Kok, Mandemakers and Wals, 2005). Apart from insights in migration decisions and in the actual trajectories, we also need to know more about the nature of (successful) integration in receiving communities, preferably in the second and third generation as

well. Presently, the barriers to this type of research in historical demography are being overcome, by creating databases of immigrants and their descendants, by linking across censuses, by using automated lists of steamboat passengers, etcetera. Examples are studies by Gjerde (1985) who traced a group of Norwegians both before and after their migration to America, and studies by the research team of Lucassen which traced German and Italian migrants to the Netherlands and their descendants (Lesger, Lucassen and Schrover, 2002; Lucassen, 2004, 2005). An inspiring example for this kind of research has been the study of (three) generations of internal migrants to Turin by Gribaudi (1987).

Demographic transition.

Finally, how is the life course approach performing in what is often perceived as the "core business" of historical demography: the study of the demographic transition? In recent decades, the classical unified theory of the fertility decline as an integral part of economic modernization has been shattered. More or less to its own surprise, the Princeton European Fertility Project concluded that economic change did not necessarily imply demographic adaptation in the form of smaller families (Coale and Watkins, 1986). Conversely, birth control occasionally spread rapidly in areas where economic transformation was delayed or absent. Instead, patterns of diffusion of innovative behaviour seemed more appropriate to understand how and why fertility declined. However, by and large, the idea of diffusion has remained a "description in search of theory" (McNicoll, 1992, 406). If religion, language or regional dialects are to function as barriers

or mediators of innovation, how does this work? Recently, new studies have begun to question the outcomes of the Princeton Project by reasserting the impact of economic changes, such as employment opportunities for women, on the rate of the fertility decline (e.g. Brown and Guinnane, 2001, 2003). Even more problematic for transition theory is the recent attack on the notion of "natural fertility". As conventional wisdom will have it, in "natural fertility" populations interference with childbearing within marriage was "outside the calculus of conscious choice" (Coale, 1973). However, recent studies have demonstrated the existence of conscious spacing in historical populations, which even appears to have been parity specific (Anderton and Bean, 1985; David and Mroz, 1987; Van Bavel, 2003, 2004; Van Bavel and Kok, 2005; Bengtsson and Dribe, 2006). Thus, the advance of stopping may simply have been a change of strategy in a long tradition of birth control. In the light of these conflicting and confusing findings that have undermined transition theory, Szoltysek (2007) suggests that historical demography is currently in a state of "epistemological crisis". He paraphrases Szreter (1996) that instead of one, unilinear process we shall have to look for "many geographically and chronologically dispa-rate processes occurring in distinct contexts and for different reasons". Unappealing as this may be in terms of Grand Theory, such an approach will be worthwhile, in particular when combined with life course concepts and methods. For instance, using life course data from the Belgium city of Leuven (XIXth century) Van Bavel has analysed the advent of stopping behaviour in ethnically mixed neighbourhoods, thus testing the diffusion hypothesis (Van Bavel, 2004b). Likewise, Matthys

and Vanhaute (2006) traced the fertility history of rural girls who had lived, as servants, with urban families, and might have picked up notions of birth control. Life course data also makes it possible to study intergenerational mechanisms in fertility control, an as yet largely unexplored area (Kok and van Bavel, 2005). For instance, by analysing careers of children from families of different size, Van Bavel (2005) investigated the notion that by reducing the size of their family, the parents could invest in the opportunities of their children. The life course approach is particularly suited to analyze the experiences and contexts that may induce individual couples to apply some form of birth control.

In family history, but also in the more "demographic" fields of ageing, migration and fertility, the life course approach is fruitful in engendering innovative, in-depth analysis. But will this alter the face of historical demography? Will it attract a new generation of practitioners and will the results be integrated in new historical syntheses? In the following section, a number of looming problems will be discussed and tackled.

REVIEWING PITFALLS AND PROSPECTS

In an earlier review of the life course approach, I suggested that—give the relative newness of this methodology—it is too early to expect new syntheses of demographic (or social) history based on life courses (Kok, 2000). Notwithstanding the innovative research discussed in the previous paragraph, I am beginning to suspect that we are not moving at all in the direction of a new, coherent vision on demographic history.

To make a stronger impact on historiography, historical life course demography needs more focus, more appealing and relevant results, and more "critical mass" in the sense of more practitioners. To realize this, we need to ask ourselves what exactly is impeding the advance of the life course in historical demography. The obstacles can be related to the theoretical principles of the approach, to the statistical methods employed, to problems with data and, finally, to the research practices in our field. Below, I identify and discuss these potential problems in the form of questions:

Can the principle of Agency really be applied to individual life courses in the past?

A person's planning capacity and belief in his /her effective control is recognized as a crucial element of the life course (Gecas, 2003). However, the concepts and semantics of the life course approach actually seem to exclude "agency". Skolnick (1983) points out how the life course "is represented as a socially determined trajectory through time, shaped by age norms, economic constraints, institutionalised patterns. The very word "transition" suggest an impersonal, agentless movement". She states that this approach leads to an "oversocialized" image of man. The more or less arbitrary selection of transitions to denote core events of one's life has irritated some scholars ("whose life course is it, anyway? ") (Skolnick, 1983, see also Watkins, 1980). If the concept of agency is already difficult to integrate in life course sociology, the problem seems insurmountable in an historical context. Given the impossibility of interviews and the lack of other personal

information, how are we to incorporate self-perception, capacities and life plans of individuals in the analysis? And, what is actually an *individual* in the context of the strong collectivities (families, villages) that characterized many past—and even present—societies?

Often, decisions about education, work, migratory moves and even marriage of individual children were taken at the household level. Thus, understanding individual life courses means understanding the operative principles and mechanisms at the level of families and households. To deal with such collective decision-making, the concept of "family strategies" is frequently employed (e.g. Moen and Wethington, 1992), although lately its popularity seems to be waning. Indeed, the concept has been attacked from various quarters. One problem is that the goals underlying family or household strategies (or individual ones, for that matter) are often simply derived from economic theories of "utility maximization". Maximization (e.g. of income) is applied to households where, supposedly, the division of tasks and even life choices (education, employment) is organized by balancing (opportunity) costs and benefits. This "harmonic" model has been criticized for neglecting the unequal positions of the sexes and generations within families, leading to exploitation of some members for the benefit of others. It has underestimated the role of culture in setting non-economic goals such as adherence to religiously inspired moral standards or seeking status and respectability. In addition, experimental psychologists have demonstrated that people are generally much more focussed on averting risks than on maximizing gains (Tversky and Kahneman, 1992;

Kahneman, 2002; Hobcraft, 2006, 169; McNicoll, 1992, 405). Historians have doubted the usefulness of the notion of strategy—at least in the sense of planning for the long term—because of the uncertainty, unpredictability and incompleteness of information that characterized the past (e.g. Viazzo and Lynch, 2002). Last but not least, the "strategy" approach is berated because, basically, it operates by *inferring* motives of individuals from their behaviour, with all the implications of circular reasoning (Engelen, 2002).

Indeed, the concept of strategy may have overemphasized certain aspects (deliberateness, planfulness) of agency at the expense of other aspects. Therefore, a more nuanced and less "strategic" view on agency is called for. In his seminal article on fertility behaviour, Leibenstein (1981) argued that maximization models are clearly incapable of clarifying decision-making. The practice of acquiring information, balancing costs and benefits of alternatives, deciding and evaluating courses of action is simply too cumbersome. Given the costs of changing behaviour (in terms of information, time and stress to make and monitor decisions), "nonoptimal passivity" is often the best solution. In many cases, it is more rational to follow routines or to delay decisions (in the future, more and better information may be available). Leibenstein coins the term "inert area" to denote traditional, routine behaviour that is only changed when strong external pressures render active decision-making unavoidable. When does "passive agency" give way to "active agency"? This may occur, for instance, in a period of severe economic depression. In fact, the aim of the Eurasia project is precisely to study how family behaviour changes through acute economic stress. Thus, in their compara-

tive study on mortality, Bengtsson, Campbell and Lee (2004) have shown how "traditional" principles of (food) redistribution within families may be reversed during periods of crisis. Thus, the challenge for historical demographers lies in hypothesizing situations and identifying periods when passive agency is no longer adequate.

This is not equivalent to saying that, given the right economic impetus, "Culture" (tradition, religion) will give way to the Agency of rational man. Several authors have argued that culture and agency cannot be separated and that they are in constant interaction. In their view, agency should be interpreted as "reflexive monitoring and rationalization of a continuous flow of conduct" (Carter, 1995, 61; see also Giddens, 1979; Bengtsson, Campbell and Lee, 2004). This means that people constantly evaluate, reformulate and reject their original plans. In fact, the life course approach that incorporates past experiences at each decision-making moment (principle of Life Span Development) is deemed ideally suited for this dynamic concept of agency (Greenhalgh, 1995, 22). For instance, in their study of migration based on a large number of British life histories, Pooley and Turnbull (1998) have shown that many individual trajectories can be interpreted as combinations of efforts at long-term improvement with short-term adaptations necessitated by adverse circumstances. Likewise, goals that are highly inspired by the dominant culture are, more or less, "negotiable" in daily decision-making (Carter, 1995). Culture is not seen at "outside" behavioural practices. Choices of people are evaluated by themselves and others and eventually alter the range of (moral)

choices that make up "culture". Or, in the words of Hammel (1990), culture can be seen as an "ongoing commentary on behaviour" and actors "move in an intensely evaluative cloud of commentary, in the presence of which they select behavioural alternatives, balancing and choosing those they think will minimize moral risk and maximize moral gain" (Hammel, 1990, 467). Hammel advises that, in order to understand this continuous feedback between behaviour and commentary, we need to (compare) small groups of actors well situated within their networks.

These nuanced views on agency can help us making sense of historical life courses. In my view, not knowing *individual* people's motives and goals should not refrain us from hypothesizing about the most *likely* goals of people in specific places and periods (Kok, 2002). We need to place people carefully within their historical and local contexts, which implies we know their general cultural preferences and behavioural routines. We then construct a series of hypotheses about the most likely goals of individuals and families, given their resources and their options. By following their behavioural choices across the life course, keeping an eye both on past individual experiences and on the interactions with historical influences, we can test under what circumstances these hypothesized goals were realized and when they were modified. How to make meaningful hypotheses? Clearly, even with a large collection of individual life courses, we cannot dispense with qualitative information (Kertzer, 1997). On the contrary, we need to make a strong effort to integrate qualitative information on social groups that are matched as closely as possible to our cohorts. This

information includes general mentality (such as openness to outside views), adherence to religious prescriptions, knowledge of alternative options, frames of references for evaluating living standards, nature of relation with parents and siblings, attitudes towards risks and risk-taking et cetera. For instance, in her study on life courses of servants, Bras (2002, 2004) made use of letters, diaries and interviews that helped her to elaborate hypotheses on the social and geographical trajectories. Likewise, Van Poppel and Röling (2003) combined detailed knowledge on the attitude of late nineteenth century medical profession towards "Neo-Malthusian" birth control with the fertility histories of general practitioners themselves.

Do event history models focus too much on single events and too little on processes?

Event history models are designed to analyse (the timing of) transitions from one "state" (e.g. unmarried) to another (married). Frequently, objections are raised against the selection and definition of these transitions. The selection is criticized for being arbitrary or for being normatively associated with middle-class and western family concepts. The transitions often simplify complex and protracted processes. For instance, marriage is merely the final moment in a drawn-out process of courtship and partner selection. Finally, transitions are too often depicted as one-time events whereas they are often reversible. For instance, leaving home is a typically repeated event (Hogan, 1991, 1). Perhaps even more problematic is that regression models do not add very much to the *explanation* of particular transitions. Too often, researchers are satisfied

with having shown the independent impact of variables on the hazards of a particular event. Thus, the approach is more statistical than analytical (McNicoll, 1991). This concern reflects the warning of Elder and Pellerin (1998, 293-294): "History makes its impress on a cohort one individual at a time. Without an understanding of the process by which that impress is made and a direct effort to model this process, studies may result only in tables of inexplicable correlations. "

Studying and explaining processes instead of single events requires more dynamic models that those currently used in (historical) demography. For instance, the family background of individual transitions is often incorporated in the models in the form of a synchronic snap-shot of household composition. More elaborate models are needed that capture the constant change in family constellation (Uhlenberg and Mueller, 2003, 126, 141-142). Indeed, these dynamics will have to be extended to kin relations beyond the household as well (Hobcraft, 2006, for an example in historical demography, see Kesztenbaum, 2005). More elaborate models (that include several time-dependent covariates) are needed to study processes and interactions between those processes.

Apart from adding more dynamic information to the covariates, event history analysis also needs to take account of behavioural *alternatives*. Indeed, one may leave one's position (e.g. unmarried) for several others (cohabitation or marriage). When studying migration, the destinations may be similarly conceptualised as "competing risks" (urban or rural, long or short distance et cetera). So-called

competing risk analysis can be done with event history models but also with multinomial logistic regression (for examples in historical demography see respectively Dribe and Stanfors, 2002 and Engelen and Kok, 2003).

In addition, there is a strong need for research techniques that really unearth the *pathways* of life courses. What are typical and non-typical (the latter can be seen as innovative or deviant) sequences of transitions? What factors explain the choice of a trajectory? In "multi-state demography" the researchers combine transitions within various domains of life (residence, fertility, partnership) to make meaningful potential trajectories (Courgeau, 2000). For instance, the "pathways" to the first child include living at the parental home (and having a child), leaving home followed by living alone (and having a child), leaving home followed by cohabitation (and having a child), leaving home followed by marriage (and having a child) et cetera (Matsuo and Willekens, 2003). Recently, new techniques allow the researcher to determine what sequences are more or less typical. These "datamining" techniques also provide "association rules", that is they indicate under what conditions a particular sequence is likely to occur (Ritschard and Oris, 2005, 306-307). Pathways can also be revealed automatically—and visually attractive—with "induction trees" (decision trees induced from data). These trees are created by statistical programs that show what background characteristics (e.g. one's birthplace, fathers' occupation) are most revealing—and in what order—for a particular life course destination (for detailed examples, see Ritschard and Oris, 2005, 308-314 and Billari *et al.*, 2006).

Current statistical practice is not given the life course approach its full due, in the sense of the principle of Life Span Development. However, more elaborate analytical and descriptive methods are being developed that will be able to reveal processes and trajectories.

Are event history models really integrating the principle of Time and Place?

The risk inherent in the life course approach is that too much emphasis is laid on personal traits and characteristics and not enough on the social settings, the options and constraints, in which individuals operate. Thus, Bourdieu's (2000) warning against the "biographical illusion" may be extended to the life course approach. Micro-level studies avoid the problem of "ecological fallacy" but may subsequently fall into the trap of "atomic fallacy" (Courgeau, 2000). Clearly, the principle of Time and Place urges the researcher to study the interactions of the life course with the temporal and local contexts. Has this been done consistently and convincingly?

The temporal context can be processed in event history analysis in several ways. First, time series (for instance, on food prices) can be included as time-dependent covariates. Second, differences between periods can be disclosed by adding dummy variables indicating time periods or by contrasting event history models of subsequent birth cohorts (e.g. Van Bavel, 2003, 2004a). However, it remains difficult to translate those finding to "aggregate" trends. For instance, what can the shifts in the explanatory power of covariates in models of fertility behaviour of subsequent birth cohorts tell us about the timing and pace of the fertility decline? Even more difficult is to take account of macro-level changes in economy and

society. Clearly, the rise of the welfare state, the shifts in labour markets and cultural changes such as secularisation all had profound impacts on the social pathways, but how to disentangle these effects, apart from a superficial comparison of time periods? One way to deal with this may be to initiate more comparative studies of life course in societies that differ in, for instance, their systems of social security. Also, studies need to be designed that span really long periods. For instance, the impact of a cultural process such as individualization on life courses might be studied by looking at how collective identities (region, religion, social class) gradually became less important in determining life choices (Matthijs *et al.*, 2005).

People live their life in multiple contexts: their household and wider family, their village or city, their region and nation. Increasingly, the global context can be added to this list. All these contexts contribute in various ways to the patterning of life courses. In event history models, researchers generally capture the effects of the context by adding information on, for instance, the households (e.g. household size, socio-economic position) and localities (e.g. number of inhabitants, occupational structure) (for an example, see Kok, 2004). Such "contextual" models have not proven very satisfactory for various reasons. Firstly, the developments in the context (see previous paragraph) is seldom integrated let alone its effects on individual life course. So far, adding context has not contributed to a more processual approach: contextual models have "provided only a skeletal view of the life course" (Elder *et al.*, 2003). Secondly, the interactions between contexts themselves are seldom taken into account. For instance: the effect of school on individual achievements may depend in part on the kind of neighbourhood in which the school is located. Thus, not only are the contexts of school and neighbourhood relevant, but also their interactions (Elder *et al.*, 2003, 15). Lastly, an important problem with micro level data is that the outcomes for individuals are seldom independent. Observations are generally clustered: people come from the same families, live in the same village et cetera. In particular for members of the same family, group effects are strong (for instance, through death clustering (Alter *et al.*, 2001)). If we really want to find out how contextual factors have an impact on individual life course, we need to control not only for hypothesized contextual variables, but for "unobserved" group effects (shared heterogeneity) as well. This can be done by adding "random effects" to linear models that allow each group its own coefficients (or only its own intercepts). Such models are known as multilevel (or mixed effects or hierarchical) models (e.g. Courgeau, 2000; Snijders, 2002; Ritschard and Oris, 2005).

Adding those random effects tends to change not so much the direction but the strength and significance of the observed contextual variables. So far, multilevel models still need to be integrated in most software for event history analysis.

Is the combination of family history, life course methodology and advanced statistics beyond the reach of individual researchers?

Historical demographers have always had to combine numerous skills. Obviously, they had to be well versed in history, sociology and economy, but they also needed basic knowledge on

fields as diverse as family law, folk customs, religion, biology and last but not least, statistics. Interdisciplinarity was and still is the hallmark of historical demography (Van der Woude, 1979). Presently, life course (historical) demography poses even higher demands. As I pointed out above, understanding life courses implies, ideally, a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods (Furstenberg, 2003, 667). Interviews, (auto) biographies, letters and other sources can help immensely in refining hypotheses about people who have only left traces in administrative records. However, qualitative data needs to be approached and interpreted with caution (Clausen, 1998). In the preceding paragraphs, I have also discussed the need for (even) more elaborate statistical models, whereas the current techniques already pose serious problems, at least for the average historian. Clearly, it is unrealistic to expect scholars to combine themselves all the skills required for this branch of historical demography (Kertzer, 1997, 844). It is even more unrealistic given the short span of academic courses (including PhD appointments) and the monodisciplinarity of most curricula. In other words, the "learning curve" for historical demography has become steeper whereas the "rewards", in the form of prestige and career opportunities, have become less visible and less certain.

If we cannot expect individual researchers to acquire all the necessary skills for life course demography, we will have to change our research practices. The solution will have to come from interdisciplinary research teams that are able to tackle the complexities of life course research (Elder *et al.*, 2003, 15). Ideally, such a research team consists of historians,

life course sociologists, data experts and statisticians. Typically, this combination of skills is not found in any faculty or department, often not even within the same university. Building multidisciplinary teams requires interuniversity, sometimes even international, cooperation. Recently, the opportunities for new forms of scientific cooperation have expanded enormously.

Already, international teams have taken up the challenge posed to historians by the recent development of East Asia. Economic historians are reviewing the long-term economic potential of China and wonder to what extent China's backwardness of the XIXth and XXth centuries had been caused by internal of external factors (Pomeranz, 2000). In a similar vein, demographic historians question the "divergence" between European demography (with its supposedly rational family formation) and the demography of the rest of the world, in particular China (Bengtsson, Campbell and Lee, 2004; Engelen and Wolf, 2005; Chuang, Engelen and Wolf, 2006). Without the internet, such interdisciplinary and international teamwork is hardly conceivable. However, there are clear limits to the building of "virtual" research teams. They appear to be most effective when organized along the "traditional" line of frequent face-to-face-contacts (Matsat, 2006). Electronic communication stimulates the team's research by enhancing discussion, text-reviewing etcetera. However, it does not solve the bottleneck of data.

Is building life course datasets too time-consuming?

Notwithstanding the gains made by computerization, creating datasets with

reconstructed life courses is still enormously time-consuming. Creating such datasets with a sufficient number (that is, allowing for significance tests) of life courses is not within reach of individual Ph D students. Generally, such databases have been created by research teams within faculty departments who tended to concentrate on particular cities or regions. Also, their reconstructions were often limited to the rather selective subset of individuals who remained in that particular city or region. This means that the migration experience still needs to be integrated in the life course. Moreover, it is difficult to generalize from these disparate local and regional collections of life courses. It seems to me there are two ways to overcome this dearth of life course data. The first is data-sharing between researchers and the second is investing in public-use datasets.

Data-sharing as a new research practice is frequently advocated in the context of *collaboratories*, (virtual) research teams that have pooled their data. A collaboratory can be seen as "a laboratory without walls, where scientists are connected to each other, to instruments, and to data independent of time and location" (Finholt, 2002, 73). Collaboratories are rather popular in the beta sciences, in particular in those fields where the use of costly instruments (e.g. telescopes) can be shared. However, many collaborative projects have already collapsed. In practice, it proves very difficult to reconcile the more immediate needs of individual researchers with potential long-terms benefits of collective work. Why should one relinquish the dataset one has spent years to create to others who may profit disproportionate to their own imput?

The success of a collaboratory depends on its capacity to deal with the problems of free-riding, trust and instability (Matsat, 2006; Wouters and Schröder, 2003).

How to avoid that some participants benefit from data-sharing and joint research without contributing themselves and thus undermine the project as a whole? How to avoid doubts about the intentions of partners who may "scoop" one's results? In other words, how to engender the trust without which a collaboratory cannot function? Finally, how to avoid the risk that the team falls apart before reaching its goals? Although we still need to discover the "best practices" for collaboratories in the humanities and social sciences, it seems evident that certain guidelines should be followed. First of all, the benefits have to be recognized by all parties involved: that is, their research will be enhanced in terms of quality (e.g. more analytic depth by adding comparisons), quantity (more publications) and more prestige by joining a team. The project needs to focus on a small number of research issues that will be tackled by a restricted number of peers that are already well acquainted (through their research network, conferences et cetera). The participants agree on renouncing exclusive property rights of their data and devise procedures to ensure the quality of the pooled data (standardizing, peer-reviewing, quality checks). They also agree on the targets of the projects: what publications are foreseen, who will be first author for what paper et cetera. Finally, it seems advisable to agree on the duration of the collaboratory. However, what is to be done with the combined dataset when the project has ended? It does not make sense to split it

up again in the privately owned original components. Probably the best course of action is to make the dataset public in the form of a website or to deposit it at a data archive. In that case, everyone can benefit from it. However, the research team can and will no longer guarantee quality control of the data (De Moor and Van Zanden, 2007).

Guaranteed quality control is precisely the hallmark of public-use datasets that are being created in various countries, such as Canada, Sweden and The Netherlands (Hall *et al.*, 2000). Indeed, these datasets have already been used for a host of innovative research projects, including some comparative ones. Historical microdatasets have been employed in researches ranging from epidemiology and genetics to demography and sociology. Still, the use of these datasets is often not as extensive as has been anticipated originally. One probable reason for this is the fact that the data are stored in a "general" format that needs further processing before it can be used for any specific research question. Furthermore, the complexity of the datastructure still requires (extensive) visits of the datacentre and/or the costs of producing ready made datasets by programmers. Not surprisingly, the bulk of publications based on public use datasets are generally produced by a limited number of already highly trained experts. It seems advisable that managers of public use datasets create interfaces that stimulate access to the data as well as produce simplified datasets that can be used in training courses and will answer simple research questions. Without efforts in this direction, it is doubtful that the number of researchers active in this field can be expanded.

Will the life course approach attract a new generation of researchers to historical demography?

Judging from the number of sessions in, for instance, the American and European Social Science History Conferences and the number of publications in international journals, historical demographers form a vibrant, successful and tightly-knit research community. However, an age profile of this community would reveal an insufficient influx of young researchers. Clearly, young researchers need to be assisted and motivated by proper training, by reducing their costs by giving them access to public use or shared datasets, and by increasing their benefits by giving them opportunity to join multidisciplinary teams and to co-author articles. However, motivation will have to come, first and foremost, from the research *topics*.

It is likely that historians interested in the subjects of household, family and gender will find their way in increasing numbers to the life course approach. This is testified by the successes of the "new family history" which is largely based on life courses and concomitant statistical techniques. However, family history as such is—and is likely to remain—a relatively small subfield within history at large. Historical demography has always recruited most of its followers from the social sciences. The problem of attracting new scholars to demography lies in part with demography itself. Currently, social scientists (demographers among them) complain that the field is lagging behind in theory-building, is focussing too much on quantification, and is loosing touch with developments in other areas of the social sciences (Greenhalgh, 1995). As McNicoll remarked, rather cynically:

"The bankclerkly and backroom activities that now make up most of population studies […] are increasingly divorced from any large, cumulative social scientific enterprise […] and […] they seem ill-suited for treating the kinds of population-linked issues that may soon appear on the public policy agenda." (McNicoll, 1991, 400).

Can historical demography avoid the image of an arcane subdiscipline within history or, even worse, of a "backroom" activity within social science? In my opinion, a number of topics can and should be addressed that will increase interest from young scholars and policy makers alike. We have already discussed ageing, surely one of the most pressing population issues in western societies. Life course studies are crucial for studying shifts in intergenerational relations, in the development of age norms, in the transformation and social implications of welfare systems et cetera. Another important subject is (international) migration and the integration of ethnic minorities. As we pointed out, life course research designs, in particular those spanning several generations, can yield important insights in the family mechanisms of (return) migration and social mobility. Finally, the past decades have witnessed a virtual revolution in family formation, at least in Western Europe. Families are no longer formed exclusively through marriage and they are much less stable than in the past. What are the causes and implications of increased rates of cohabitation and divorce? Why has fertility fallen below replacement level and what will be the consequence? What are the long-term effects on individuals from living in different (subsequent and simultaneous) household settings? Clearly, many of the

questions surrounding the "second demographic transition" are already being addressed by demographers (Van der Kaa, 1991). However, the origins of this dramatic shift in behaviour are understudied. Also, demographic behaviour—in particular individual variation and change over time—is seldom placed in the contexts of groups (social or religious), of time and place. In other words, a contextualized and historicized analysis of the second demographic transition should be put high on the research agenda.

CONCLUSIONS

The analysis of standardized biographies is not merely a new research technique for historical demography. Indeed, the life course approach can be seen as a new paradigm because demographic behaviour can now be studied in its true complexity, that is, involving past experiences, alternative options, multiple processes and ongoing interaction with place and time. Already, historical life course studies have invigorated the field of family history. This field will be strengthened even further by integrating qualitative and quantitative techniques.

However, various problems may obstruct the advance of the life course approach. First, although event history analysis has proven a highly valuable tool for showing the relative strength of factors involved in demographic behaviour, it has still fallen short of elucidating life courses as processes. More elaborate models will have to incorporate the impact of past experiences, of behavioural alternatives and of interactions among processes and contexts. Secondly, the learning curve for historical demography threatens to become too steep, in

particular when such advanced techniques need to be mastered. More (inter)disciplinary team work might solve this problem. Third, the life course approach is highly demanding in terms of data. These demands can hardly be met by ordinary faculty-based research teams, let alone by individual researchers. Research (and training) practices in this field will have to shift towards data-sharing within collaboratories and towards exploiting public use datasets. Finally, in order to attract scholars from various

fields, research need to be focused on topics such as population ageing, below replacements fertility, migration and ethnic integration. Datasets of life courses will prove an invaluable tool for the study of our day and age.

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SUMMARY

Historical demography seems to have taken a decisive "micro-turn" by focusing more and more on life courses as a central concept. According to its advocates, the "life course approach" represents nothing less than a new paradigm for (historical) demography. This article evaluates this claim, by looking at research achievements and by discussing potential obstacles to fulfilling the promises of this new approach.

The adoption of the perspective of the life course has already resulted in many innovative contributions, in particular on topics disregarded by "traditional" historical demography (e.g. the study of orphanhood, life-cycle service, comparative studies on family dynamics). Also, research fields such as ageing, migration and fertility have benefited from the collection and analysis of life course data.

Notwithstanding these advances, the further development of the life course approach may be obstructed for a number of reasons. These have to do with the concept itself, with the statistical methods used for studying life courses, with the common research practices in our discipline, and, finally, with the "attractiveness" of our field. The concept of "agency"—the capacity for planning one's own life—is clearly difficult to apply in historical research. However, not knowing individual people's motives and goals should not refrain us from hypothesizing about the most likely goals of people in specific places and periods. The method of event history analysis still falls short of elucidating life courses as processes. More elaborate models should reveal the impact of past experiences, of behavioural alternatives and of interactions among processes and contexts. However, the learning curve for historical demography threatens to become too steep, in particular when highly advanced techniques need to be mastered. More (inter)disciplinary team work might solve this problem. Also, the life course approach demands rich and complicated datasets. This can hardly be accomplished by ordinary faculty-based research teams, let alone by individual researchers. Research (and training) practices in this field will have to shift towards data-sharing within collaboratories and towards exploiting public use datasets. Finally, to attract scholars from other fields, research needs to be focused on policy-relevant topics such as population ageing, below replacements fertility, migration and ethnic integration.

RÉSUMÉ

La démographie historique semble avoir pris un tournant « micro » en se concentrant de plus en plus sur l'analyse des parcours de vie. Si l'on suit ses avocats, il ne s'agit de rien moins que d'un nouveau paradigme de la démographie (historique). Cet article propose une vue critique de cette affirmation, en examinant les succès en termes de recherche et en discutant les obstacles potentiels à la réussite des promesses de cette nouvelle approche.

L'adoption de l'analyse des parcours de vie a déjà fourni des contributions très neuves par rapport aux sujets ignorés de la démographie historique traditionnelle (les orphelins, le service domestique dans le cycle de vie, les études comparées sur les dynamiques familiales). Des sujets comme le vieillissement, les migrations et la fécondité ont également bénéficié de la collecte et de l'analyse des données du parcours de vie.

En dépit de ces avancées, le développement de cette approche peut être compromis par plusieurs facteurs : le concept lui-même, les méthodes statistiques utilisées et les pratiques de recherches dominantes ainsi que l'attraction de notre champ. Tout d'abord l'affirmation de la capacité d'organiser sa propre vie est d'application difficile dans les recherches historiques. Néanmoins, l'ignorance des motifs et des buts des individus ne devrait pas dissuader d'identifier quels étaient les plus probables dans certains lieux et certaines périodes. Ensuite, la méthode de l'« event history analysis » ne

permet pas de clarifier les parcours de vie en tant que processus. Des modèles plus élaborés devraient permettre de préciser l'impact des expériences passées, des conduites alternatives, des interactions entre les processus et les contextes. Enfin, le coût d'apprentissage de la démographie historique risque de devenir trop élevé, en particulier si des techniques encore plus poussées doivent être utilisées. Des équipes interdisciplinaires pourraient résoudre cette difficulté. Par ailleurs, l'approche du parcours de la vie suppose des bases de données compliquées et très riches. Tout cela ne peut être accompli par les équipes universitaires traditionnelles et les chercheurs solitaires. Dans ce domaine, les pratiques de recherche (et d'apprentissage) doivent s'orienter vers le partage de données, la collaboration et l'exploitation de banques de données publiques. Finalement, afin d'attirer les chercheurs d'autres domaines, la recherche doit privilégier des questions à fort enjeu politique aujourd'hui comme le niveau de la fécondité (enjeu du remplacement), les migrations et l'intégration des populations étrangères.