

GENDER, WORK, AND VULNERABILITY  
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**Gender, Work, and Vulnerability: a multilevel live course perspective**

Doris Hanappi, PhD

Laura Bernardi, Prof.

Laboratory for Life Course Research (LaboPavie)  
Faculty of Social and Political Sciences  
University of Lausanne  
Bâtiment Vidy  
CH-1015 Lausanne, Switzerland  
Tel.: +41 21 692 38 40  
Fax: +41 21 692 38 45  
<http://www.unil.ch/labopavie>

submitted to

International Labour Process Conference

Rutgers University, New Jersey

15-17<sup>th</sup> March 2010

(please direct all correspondence to [doris.hanappi@unil.ch](mailto:doris.hanappi@unil.ch))

## **1. Introduction**

The effects of globalization and economic change on professional and family life are often summed up by pointing out that post-industrial societies encounter changed risk structures with respect to the previous period (Beck, 1987; Boltanski, 1987; Giddens, 1990). The expression “changed risk structures” in the employment domain refer to occupational structures, employment conditions, and work practices which impact employment trajectories, patterns of workforce participation, and family formation practices (Bernardi, 2008; Seiger and Wiese, 2008; Sapin, 2007). One major consequence of these changes is the emergence of gender-specific forms of vulnerability which become manifest in states such as unemployment, underemployment, precarious work arrangements, or unequal pay.

The decreased binding power of norms, family, and class, the constraints engendered by competitiveness in globalized markets, the discontinuities in family and work careers, and the individualization of risks contribute to deeply transform individuals’ life and put upon them new pressure and threats. Many individuals are vulnerable to such strains, because they lack important resources, or because the hardships they face, or their accumulation, are too demanding on them. Their environment is not receptive enough or rewarding to the efforts they do. Vulnerability processes concern a large share of the population in post-industrial societies, and produce distress and social exclusion. Recent surveys also indicate that the proportion of people declaring that they are stressed is increasing (OECD, 2007). Given its high financial and human costs, vulnerability constitutes a major challenge for societies. For this reason, the study of vulnerability is on the scientific and political agenda of a growing number of Western countries and international organizations such as the UNDP (2006) and the OECD (2007).

Several attempts to studying the diverse forms and dynamics of vulnerability and how women’s and men’s work lives are differentially affected have only yielded partial results. First, these attempts were based on short-term observations, or because they were focused on one life sphere (e.g. either work or family life). Second, research on such gender differences was anchored in one discipline or looked at vulnerability at one point in time. However, work trajectories may vary considerably from one context to another, from one generation to another, and are subject to various (personal) socio-structural and individual resources. Thus, we consider how these variations in work trajectories are rooted in different contexts over time and expect to gain insight into the interplay of various factors affecting the development of men’s and women’s work lives.

This paper aims at developing an integrative framework accounting for longitudinal and multi-level dimensions of work and family careers. At minimum, it is intended to help

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providing a way of conceptualizing the relationships between individuals, work, and family from a gender perspective. For this it would be useful to analyze work trajectories from a life course perspective on the basis of concepts like stress proliferation, coping strategies and cumulative disadvantages which contribute to the development of vulnerability to unemployment or precariousness. Second, we propose to add to the longitudinal dimension, a multilevel dimension. We consider individual vulnerability as embedded into a system of socio-structural resources, which determine individual resources and opportunities for overcoming critical life events. The amount of resources available to each individual at any given point in time is then rooted in the lifelong dynamic interplay between individual and socio-structural elements. We are particularly interested in applying such longitudinal and multilevel framework to identify the main determinants of gender differences in individual work trajectories and gender specific forms of, and exposure to, vulnerability.

This integrative approach will facilitate a broad range of future empirical research by building on a comprehensive and interdisciplinary framework of vulnerability throughout the individual's life:

- First, it will facilitate research on the emergence of *new career patterns* within different welfare state and social policy regimes. This will provide us with an analytical basis to examine the short- and long-term effects of these patterns on vulnerability and individual strategies for coping with a higher demand for job mobility and time commitment. Additionally, we will explore the consequences of new occupational activities in the tertiary sector, in particular in care and personal service occupations.
- Second, this analytical framework will enable an analysis of the *work-family interface*. It will allow an analysis of gender differences in professional life at the interface with the family sphere in order to assess the relevance of socio-structural resources and social support for achieving work-life balance. It will allow for assessing the ability to positively respond to critical life events, and in this way to overcome risks such as unemployment or precariousness.
- Third, since the work and family spheres are dynamically interrelated, we propose also to look at the *reverse causality* between them, i.e. the effects of work on family. Thus, the framework will provide a positive critique to the normative model of conjugality and parenthood accounting for fundamental questions such as the timing of family formation, or the stability of personal relationships.

In Section 2 we present a brief *state-of-the-art review* on primarily empirical findings on gender differentials in work and family careers. We outline the role of welfare-state regimes, social policy, and emerging new career patterns (section 2.1.), and focus on some

main aspects of the work-family interface (section 2.2.) Far from being complete this review wants to show the variety of research available on these topics and, at the same time, highlight areas for improvement. The argument proceeds from these findings towards Section 3, in which we describe a life-course perspective of states and processes of vulnerability that challenge the sustainable development of the work life course. In the last Section 4, we propose a multi-level model, which may be used to assess the empirical diversity of trajectories and processes of vulnerability. Finally we briefly conclude by a reflection on the implications of undertaking research within this frame and with listing a few of the major challenges of the agenda we set.

## **2. State of the art: Research on gender differentials on work and family careers**

The literature defines work trajectories in manifold ways. In our framework work trajectories result from the interplay of socioeconomic forces and individual biographies (Ghisletta et al., 2005; Sapin et al., 2007). This assumption denotes the nature of work trajectories, involving two main aspects. First, work trajectories are characterized by a long-term perspective that links events, life stages, and transitions (Blossfeld, 1986; Mayer, 2009). Second, work trajectories result from a system made up by a set of individual (psychological and physical) and socio-structural resources (socioeconomic, familial, relational), resources that are inscribed in a system of social stratification. This system includes several dimensions (socio-economic status, education, gender, and ethnicity) and their interrelations (Baltes, Reuter-Lorenz & Rösler, 2006; Baltes & Singer, 2001, Elder, 1998; Settersten, 2003). Explanations for gender differences of career and workforce participation patterns involve societal, household (familial, living conditions), organizational, and individual level factors (for this see Mayer, 2009).

### *2.1. Welfare regimes, social policies and new career patterns*

Macro explanations reflect the idea that characteristics of the national context matter for the development of female and male employment careers (Esping-Andersen, 1990; Lewis 2005; Hitlin & Elder, 2007). These trajectories are embedded in a given social context and are thus affected by macro-level socio-economic change (Hitlin & Elder, 2007). Comparative empirical research shows considerable differences in female and male professional trajectories that relate to different *welfare regimes* and *social policies*. However, the EU's and OECD's countries encouragement of these social policies and the precise content of policy objectives vary considerably. This results in different types of support for families, support in cash, in kind, or the provision of leave entitlement after the birth of a child. Differences in work trajectories also reflect variations in the extent to which social policies are connected to pro-employment and equal opportunity policies at work.

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One major research stream within macro approaches addresses the influence of national social policy and welfare regimes (Stier and Lewin-Epstein, 2001; Esping-Andersen, 1990). For instance, Esping-Andersen (1990) and Gustafsson (1994) demonstrated the effects of work organization and welfare regimes on men's and women's employment behavior throughout the life course (labor market participation rates, taking up part-time work, etc.). Studies on career opportunities and occupational achievement (Blossfeld, 1986, 2006; Rosenfeld & Trappe, 2004; Mayer, 2000) of women and man show that state welfare policy affects gender differences in employment (Mills and Blossfeld 2005). Social policies can regulate work-family relations and thereby facilitate the combination of work and parenthood (Chang 2000). Similarly, educational policies have an impact on women's labor force participation by either tracking them into occupational training paths early in their careers (Blossfeld and Huinink 1991) that reduce their overall earnings potential or providing opportunity to attain high-earnings and high-prestige occupations (Hannan, Schönmann and Blossfeld 1990).

Recent organizational research suggests that employment careers are becoming increasingly unpredictable, diversified and complex within and across national borders (Mills et al. 2006; Arthur and Rousseau, 1996; Hall, 2002, 2004; Iellatchitch, Mayrhofer & Meyer, 2003; Peiperl & Baruch, 1997; Hanappi, 2007).<sup>1</sup> The so-called individualization process renders men and women increasingly responsible for their life-style choices as “entrepreneurs” of their own aspirations, successes or failures (Ehrenberg, 1995; Chiapello and Boltanski, 1999, 2005). The long-term effects of such macro changes influence individual exposure to risk and simultaneously influence individuals' ability to face such risks. While maintaining or enhancing such abilities is associated with sustainable human development and resilience (Sen, 2000), the decrease or lack of those abilities leads to various forms of vulnerability.<sup>2</sup> From that perspective, globalization and economic change have potentially paradoxical consequences. On the one hand, certain macro-social changes, especially the increase in employment opportunities in the *tertiary sector*, would seem to have resulted in increased female economic activity rates—i.e., higher than previous levels of female autonomy and protection from certain forms of vulnerability. On the other hand, recent studies show an increase in the exposure of women to new risks (precariousness, unemployment, etc.), particularly in female-headed single-parent households, as well as

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<sup>1</sup> Globalization may entail what has been defined as the “Brazilianisation” of employment trajectories (Beck, 2000), marking the end of the so-called Fordist model of stability, continuous employment and clear-cut promotion paths for a large number of individuals in contemporary Western societies.

<sup>2</sup> The notion of vulnerability is taken as referring to an individual's ability to successfully participate in the labor market—i.e., to avoid unemployment, precariousness, poverty and social exclusion (read more in section 3).

indicating the feminization of poverty, particularly later in life (Budowski, Tillman & Bergman, 2002).

The changed structure of the labor market with an increase in the proportion of the active population employed in the tertiary sector, particularly refers to care and personal service occupations. To some extent, these new jobs are related to the outsourcing of those activities that were previously performed on a non-professional basis by married women in the home (the so-called “sandwich generation”, Perrig-Chiello and Höpflinger, 2005) and to the reduction of welfare state spending on care for dependant social groups (young children, the elderly and the handicapped). These jobs are often associated with “non-standard” employment contracts (various forms of self-employment, high rates of part-time work, sub-contracting, etc.). Some authors have suggested that the career patterns of women have long been characterized by a higher level of “boundarylessness” than those of their male counterparts, with women choosing (or being shepherded into) those occupational niches that provide some degree of “time sovereignty” and flexibility (Blanchard, Le Feuvre et al. 2009).

Research from sociology, demography and political economy on male and female employment careers has addressed the impact of different welfare-state regimes, social policies, and institutional structures. In contrast, most of the career studies focused on individual and organizational factors influencing careers. Many of them have in common their focus on either work or family life and hence do not consider the interrelation between these two spheres. Attempts to consider individual resources have been rarely addressed so far in relation to macro-level factors (one exception is the study on careers and uncertainty accounting for age, skills and experience by Blossfeld 2005).

## *2.2. Work-family interface*

New configurations of “work and family” with increased female workforce participation and with more dual earner couples (Tharenou, 1999) have emerged in the last decades. In the last 50 years partnership ideas have changed for both men and women (Jacobs and Gerson, 2001; Erler, 1996; Kaufmann, 1990). The following literature review will concentrate on *gender norms, changes in the normative model of conjugality and parenthood*, and consequences of the *unequal distribution of family responsibilities* for work careers.

One stream of research addresses *gender norms* (Charles and Bradley, 2002; Marini and Brinton 1984; Marini and Fan 1997; Schmid and Gazier 2002) as important contextual and institutional factors impacting the work-family interface. They that have been investigated as mediators of individual employment trajectories. Marini and Brinton found evidence in their studies that the process of cultural transmission creates different preferences, interests, and aspirations in males and females. These differences lead then to training for,

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and applying for, different jobs. In a similar vein, Jacobs (1999, 2001) has argued that early socialization is not all, highlighting the instability of many individual's job aspirations and choices throughout the life cycle. The weak correlation found between the sex composition of the job aspired to or held at two time points are surprisingly small. The view of minimizing the role of socialization and attributing more importance to broader social forces is shared among various sociologists (Epstein 1988; Reskin and Roos 1990; Bilbey and Bilbey 2002).

Another main topic concerns changes in the *normative model of conjugality* and *parenthood* that was historically associated with the male breadwinner model of professional trajectories (i.e. full-time, continuous employment for men, and at best, part-time, discontinuous employment for women) (Crompton, 1999; Widmer et al., 2003). As women increase their formal educational qualifications, the timing of major family events (setting up a home, getting married, having children, or deciding to remain childless) no longer depends solely on the ability of men to engage in paid employment, but now also depends on the employment practices and aspirations of women themselves (Le Goff et al., 2006; 2009; Levy et al., 2006; Mayrhofer et al., 2008). The "reconciliation" of demands related to the family sphere and to employment is still deemed to be the responsibility of women (Wass & McNabb, 2006; Höpflinger, 2004; Buehler, 2004), but the conditions under which female career options are selected have significantly changed.

Numerous studies have found that the persistently *unequal distribution of domestic and childcare responsibilities* between the sexes tends to make it more difficult for women than for men to meet the existing professional performance criteria and objectives (Carlson and Kacmar, 2000; Stoner, Hartman and Arora, 1990; Wass and McNabb, 2006; Buehlmann et al., 2009). Research argues here in two ways. First, similar domestic arrangements are interpreted differently by potential employers and/or clients according to the sex of the person concerned, leading to a "signaling" mechanism that systematically reduces the career opportunities for mothers while increasing those for fathers (de Singly, 1994). The so-produced differences in the career opportunity structure are likely to result in gendered variations in the definition of "professional success" and criteria for "career satisfaction" (Hofmans, Dries and Pepermans, 2008). These, in turn, will continue to produce gender-differentiated career paths at different levels of the occupational hierarchy (Falter, 2007; Ferro-Luzzi & Silber 1998). Second, the unequal distribution of family responsibilities results in gender variations of family involvement. Family involvement refers to the importance of the family to an individual and the extent of psychological investment in the family. As a similar concept to job involvement, family involvement creates internal pressure to invest energy and time in the family domain to fulfil family role demands (Parasuraman and Simmers, 2001, p. 555). As Blossfeld and Drobnic (2001) argued the number of children, and

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the work family life organization of the partners (e.g. breadwinner orientation versus dual earner couple) are important factors influencing the form of family responsibility. For instance, Bernardi et al. (2008), have shown that when confronted with similar decisions related to professional and family life, young adults from former East and West Germany display different priorities, and that this has consequences for their professional and family trajectories.

Various scholars have examined the characteristics of the family domain as predictors of work-family conflict (Behson, 2002; Carlson, 1999; Fox and Dwyer, 1999; Parasuraman and Simmer, 2001; Day and Chamberlain, 2006; Grzywacz and Mark, 2000). Research on predictors of work-family conflict addressed forms of working hours such as working weekends (Schneider, 2005) and work variability (Fox and Dwyer, 1999). More or less implicitly research assumed that work-family conflicts negatively affect individual well-being in general, and decrease socio-economic and psychological resources which are relevant for individual development in both life domains (Pearlin and Skaff, 1996). As a consequence, individuals may have less economic resources (i.e. financial resources, property) and suffer from increased stress and chronic strain (i.e. role conflict), which exposes them to the risks of unemployment or precariousness. Such risks may either result from critical events in the domain of family (e.g. divorce, separation) or work (e.g. job loss, burn-out), or in both as a consequence of one another. However, given the focus on predictors for work-family conflict or career outcomes, the impact of welfare-state regimes and historical dimensions on labor market outcomes and the development of vulnerability remain obscure in this strand of research.

The increasing instability of personal relationships makes it increasingly likely that events related to the family sphere will have an impact on the employment and working conditions of men and women throughout their adult-life-cycles. The supporting activities of women can no longer be taken for granted. According to Schmid (2001) the forms of partnerships and families have differentiated including the number of children.<sup>3</sup> These constellations are supposed to lead to given parental demands depending on the number and ages of the children (Voyadoff, 1988; Lewis and Cooper, 1987).

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<sup>3</sup> There exist rather traditional forms (living together in the same household with or without marriage), couples living and working in various locations (so-called commuters or long-distance marriages), or couples living in the same area but who have decided to have separate households (so called living apart together couples). Within all these forms we find various constellations without children, with one child, and so forth (see Schmid, 2001).



### *2.3. Impact of work on family life*

The proposed analytical framework is also supposed to provide a better understanding of the *reverse causality* of the family-work interface, i.e. the effect of work on family life. In industrialized countries of the 21<sup>st</sup> century increasing demands from the labour market substantially affect family life. These changes affect the timing of family formation processes which is no longer synchronized with the formal stages of a (masculine) career (Widmer and Ritschard, 2009). Various scholars have concentrated on the affect increasing job instability and changing employment practices have on family formation practices (Le Goff et al., 2006; 2009; Levy, Gauthier and Widmer 2006). Bernardi, Klärner and von der Lippe (2008) found evidence for the impact of job instability on family formation practices and timing of parenthood. Overall, we are interested to analyze the effects of provided resources (e.g. income, professional network) and demands (i.e. in terms of flexibility and time, geographical mobility) on family careers.

### **3. Life course perspectives on vulnerabilities in work and family careers**

Micro and macro explanations of the many forms and processes pertinent to labor market and employment are of crucial interest in post-industrial societies. The studies which have already tackled these issues, produced only partial knowledge, either because they were based on short-term observations, or because they focused only on one life's sphere (e.g. work or family or health), on one stage of processes, on one particular period of the life course, or because they are anchored in one discipline and ignore crucial mechanisms. In order to meet such challenges, we propose to build on life course research and formulate an analytical framework that considers the intersection among various life course spheres as an interrelated whole. In addition, to the micro dimension of individual life courses, we add the effect of their historical and institutional context. We strongly believe that only such a comprehensive view will be able to identify the appropriate answers, personal and collective, which will help to create a more sustainable societal environment for individuals' development. Indeed, we see as a major goal to design and propose innovative and adequate social policy interventions.

The proposed general theoretical framework is anchored in the *life course perspective*, which emphasizes, in the first place, the nexus between social pathways, developmental trajectories and social change. In addition, the life course paradigm insists on the necessity to consider episodes in human lives within the longer stretch of the life time, following the strong assumption that prior life history has strong impacts on later life outcomes. A second theoretical anchor of our framework, strongly related and coherent with a life course perspective, is the *stress process model*, whose goal is to identify and understand

the mechanisms relating the stressful life conditions experienced by individuals, the resources they can activate, and the physical, mental and social well-being that results from these interactions.

Within this framework, we will investigate three main research questions. (1) Which diverse employment statuses exist and how are they distributed by education and gender, and status? (2) What are the long-term mechanisms and socio-structural factors on the development of work life sequences that make individuals being differentially vulnerable to sources of stress? (3) What are individual psychological aspects of the organization of one's work life course and how are they interrelated with the ability to cope with unfavourable transitions? In particular, to what extent do individual resources previous to education predispose men and women to mobilize relevant resources to overcome vulnerability?

### *3.1. The concept of vulnerability*

To start with, it is necessary to address the concept of *vulnerability* in its various dimensions in terms of *states* and *processes* as from the perspective of different disciplines in the social sciences. Several sociologists who have worked on social exclusion (Castel, 1995; Gallie & Paugam, 2000; Leisering & Leibfried, 1999) have pointed out that the risk of poverty as a chronic state has not really increased but is the emerging part of a protruding iceberg of precariousness, frailty, or insecurity—in other words, of vulnerability. Larger segments of the population are living “on the edge” or are confronted with various forms of what Bourdieu (1993) termed “social sufferings.” From a psychological perspective, vulnerability has often been approached as processes regarding the coping and mediation of stress (Elder, George & Shanahan, 1996; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Pearlin, 1989) and resilience (Rutter, 1987; Peters, Leadbeater & McMahon, 2006). This results in either the continuity or development of a lack of adaptability, with possible clinical outcomes like depression (Baltes, Lindenberger & Staudinger, 1998; Ryff et al., 1998).

*Vulnerability* denotes a state in which a deficit of resources or other adverse conditions affects the individual's capacity to cope with critical life events and processes and the ability to take advantage of opportunities. In turn, this state exposes individuals to negative outcomes such as personal distress, downward life conditions, limited social participation and the inability to live a valued life. These may develop into further chains of adversities. This definition is close to the concept of life course risks (DiPrete, 2002), and aims to emphasize the double nature of vulnerability: on the one hand, the manifest situation of a lack of important resources for strains in one's environment; on the other hand, a latent reality which may be shaped by this state of affairs (e.g. an incapacity to respond to later stressors or to successfully strive for a desired goal). Vulnerability is inherently dynamic,

implying changes in exposure to risk, both in the level and range of available resources, and in the compensatory actions undertaken. Although other similar notions have been proposed in the literature, such as frailty (Spini, Ghisletta, Guilley & Lalive d'Épinay, 2007) or precariousness (Castel, 1995; Paugam, 2000), we have chosen to use the concept of vulnerability insofar as it is free from strong past disciplinary definitions and not yet related to a specific life stage, like frailty and very old age for example. This concept is thus suited to an interdisciplinary research network.

From this conceptualization derives the need to disentangle factors and mechanisms generating a vulnerability state from those which impact its consequences and, at the individual level, to develop dynamic analyses intended to understand how earlier conditions or events are related to later outcomes, whether positive or negative. Hence, we will address *three main aspects, relying in particular on longitudinal projects*: (1) major factors and processes of differential vulnerability and how do they relate to long-term trajectories? (2) What are the lifelong consequences (outcomes) of vulnerability? (3) What kinds of resources and actions may compensate vulnerability states and dynamics across the life course?

### *3.2. Factors and processes of differential vulnerability*

In order to understand why individuals are differentially vulnerable to life changes, or more chronic strains, we will consider the socio-structural and institutional, as well as organizational factors, which, to a varying degree, locate individuals in adverse conditions or limit their resources. On the other side, we will focus on how differential vulnerability relates to biographical antecedents and to long-term trajectories. We adapt the more general framework that we have developed within Spini and colleagues (2009) to investigate in particular gender differentials in work and family related vulnerability. One of the most basic achievements of the life course paradigm is to show the extent to which prior life history may have a strong impact on later life outcomes (Mayer, 2009). Within this framework, we will be particularly concerned with the hypothesis of accumulation of (dis)advantages (Dannefer 1987, 2003; DiPrete & Eirich, 2006; O'Rand, 1996, 2006, Ferraro et al., 2009), also known as the Matthew effect (Merton, 1968). These theories address two mechanisms of generating increasing or decreasing (dis)advantages across the life course. The first, anchored at the individual level, is interested in how social inequalities and exposure to various critical events and life transitions result in vulnerability or adaptability. The second, anchored at a more collective level, analyzes how intra-cohort differences evolve through shared (economic and political changes) and non-shared experiences across the life course, which calls for a comparative strategy of analyses across periods, groups and contexts.

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*a) Consequences of vulnerability:* Here, our first goal is to systematically investigate the outcomes of vulnerability and to identify what are the factors and mechanisms which lead to those outcomes. Our view of outcomes is comprehensive. We will address personal well-being as well as social integration and citizenship both in terms of power to act and sense of belonging. Our first hypothesis is that vulnerability has practical consequences at very different levels, which may be extended into much later in life. Following an argument made by Aneshensel (1992), our second hypothesis is that the various factors and mechanisms in play may differ according to the sources of stress people experience, as well as the kinds of outcomes. Another concern is how, and under which circumstances, vulnerability may develop into further chains of adversities.

Two mechanisms of what is often termed stress proliferation (Pearlin, Aneshensel & Leblanc, 1997) will be more particularly investigated. The first refers to the fact that vulnerability in one life sphere (i.e., health, work, social relations and the family) may diffuse itself in other life-interdependent spheres. The other relates to another key theoretical axiom of the life course perspective and represents a point of convergence with the stress framework. This is the *linked lives* principle, which denotes the interdependence of individuals in social networks (Elder, Kirkpatrick & Crosnoe, 2003). Research on the family has clearly shown how individual family members often experience events and conditions together; even when family members do not experience the same things directly, they still can be profoundly affected by the transitions or experiences lived by others (e.g., Bierman & Milkie, 2008; Uhlenberg & Mueller, 2003; Vogt & Yuan, 2008). Extending these insights, we will investigate how vulnerability experienced by individuals is diffused not only to their family but also to other members of their social network.

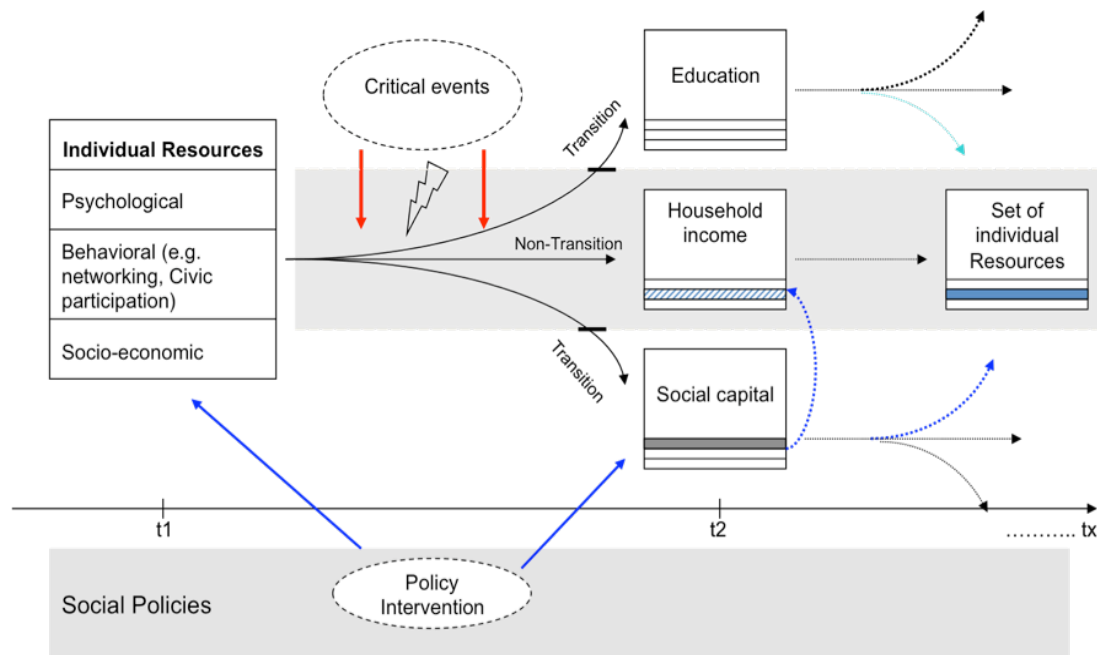
*b) Compensating vulnerability:* Early disadvantages or stressors are not inexorably transformed into cumulative chains of adversities in stress proliferation in increasingly, unequal trajectories. A vulnerability state does not automatically translate into “negative” outcomes (Furstenberg, 2005; Thoits, 2006). A well-known result of social psychology is that individuals have different resources at their disposal to anticipate and control the effects of adversity and life hazards (Heckhausen, 1999). Further, structural and institutional mechanisms, as well as social support, may downplay deleterious processes (Antonucci, Birditt & Akiyama, 2009). A key question is to scrutinize the factors that enable individuals to overcome a vulnerability state or to counteract its negative consequences. Among these factors, special attention will be given to the available resources and their use by the person, to the compensatory actions initiated by their social networks or by social policies, and to the interactions between these factors.

Processes of *cumulative disadvantage* are currently a hot question in life course research (O’Rand & Henretta, 1999). We will examine how and when such processes begin and how they develop across the life course in a long-term perspective. That is, are there specific critical events that trigger cumulative processes in the work life course and that expose individuals to vulnerability? How and for whom do vulnerability states develop into further adversities and growing disadvantages? Such an approach will also analyze how transitions, with their succession and duration, appear longitudinally in diverse and interrelated life trajectories (notably related to work, the family). One recent issue also concerns the possible negative consequences of *missed transitions* (see Bernardi et al., 2007). For example, what happens to a young adult who does not experience the transition to a first job? Within this context, cumulative processes will be related to social inequalities, social mobility and social integration (e.g., Levy et al., 1997; Perrig-Chiello, 2004a), as well as to macro-factors of differentiation, be they related to *structural and institutional factors* or to *contextual variables*.

#### **4. Gender vulnerabilities in work and family careers: an analytical model**

Vulnerability, and the risks associated with the differentiation of life trajectories within a cohort, are heavily related to socio-demographic characteristics. Well-known effects of social inequality are the relationships between gender, nationality, age, and adverse life consequences. Research has shown substantial differences between the fate of children born in a disadvantaged family and those born in more privileged families (Schoon & Bynner, 2003; Wilson, Shuey & Elder, 2007). However, the exact lifelong processes intertwining selection (e.g., low health status as a criterion of selection in the process of social mobility) and causation (e.g., socio-economic status as a cause of future health) are still to be clarified, in particular, during adult life (see George, 2003a). Vulnerability is also a question of economic, political and social environment. The structure of opportunities and constraints that an individual has to face at different stages of the life course is related to historical periods, structural and institutional contexts and geographical space (Elder, 1995; Kohli, 2007; Mayer, 2004; Shanahan, 2000). Figure 1 illustrates the dynamics referred to as accumulative (dis-) advantage in which critical events and chronic strain affect individual resources over time, modify the resources set available to each individual; such resources set is what defines the threshold for falling or resisting to subsequent threats and risks.

**Figure 1: Accumulation processes** adapted for the analysis of gender differentials in work and family life (general model developed by Spini, Oris, Bernardi, and Hanappi, 2009)



#### 4.1. A stress process framework

Together with the perspective of the accumulation of disadvantages, we draw on the socio-psychological *stress process framework* (Pearlin, 1989; Turner & Schieman, 2008). Within this approach, there is a consensus for considering that there are three major domains that are parts of a dynamic and systemic process: sources of stress (such as negative life events and chronic strain); mediators that can dampen or exacerbate the adverse effects of stress (such as social support, personality, coping strategies and self-concept; see Heckhausen, 1999; Taylor & Seeman, 2009); and outcomes (mental, physical and socioeconomic problems). This framework is not only adapted to the study of vulnerability, but is also in close convergence with the life course perspective (George, 2003b; Pearlin & Skaff, 1996). We will develop this framework in four main directions. The first relates to chronic stressors to structural location and institutional rules. It is, for instance, well known that socioeconomic status is associated with health strain (for Switzerland: Burton-Jeangros, 2009; Sapin, Spini & Widmer, 2007). Another example is the exposure to permanent stress due to discriminatory rules and practices against migrants or minorities (Cattacin & Chimienti, 2008). A second development concerns critical events, defined as events that have a large impact on the individual's trajectory. They have been studied by various researchers and include health events (Lalive d'Epinau et al., 2003; Perrig-Chiello & Perren, 2005), family and professional events (Derosas & Oris, 2002; Levy et al., 2006; Sapin & Widmer, 2008; Hanappi, 2007), and economic events (Oris et al., 2005). Another major focus of this approach concerns mediation processes, in which vulnerability is seen as a lack of an

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individual's resilience, or environmental responsiveness to their efforts, in relation to various stressors and critical events (see Lalive d'Epinay & Spini, 2008; Spini et al., 2007). This has been a central focus of recent research (Girardin Keciour & Spini, 2006; Clémence et al., 2007; Perrig-Chiello et al., 2006), although further investigations are much needed particularly over a longer time-span. Extending the range of outcomes that is traditionally considered in stress research, we also investigate the consequences of vulnerability in terms of social integration and citizenship (e.g., Cavalli, Bickel & Lalive d'Epinay, 2007).

We propose an integration of several theories (cumulative disadvantages, stress and coping processes), an "agency within structure" approach, and a set of key concepts. The dynamic model of individual resources and stresses drawn on Pearlin is pivotal to our framework (1989; see also Pearlin et al., 2005; Turner & Schieman, 2008).

However, this is clearly a micro-level resource model in which individual outcomes affect the availability of resources to individuals and, thus, their ability to react to further stresses. Yet these mechanisms are embedded in specific contexts, and they occur within different and parallel life spheres (or life course domains). We feel that it is necessary to embed such micro-level model into the larger framework, i.e., to consider a system made of the set of individual (psychological and physical) and socio-structural (socioeconomic, family, relational) resources people have, and which define individual situations or states at a given moment in life (Lalive d'Epinay et al., 1983). In other words we acknowledge that the amount of resources available to each individual is rooted in a lifelong dynamic interplay between the individual and the socio-structural factors (Baltes, Reuter-Lorenz, & Rösler, 2006; Baltes & Singer, 2001; Elder, 1998; Settersten, 1999, 2003). Individual resources are inscribed in systems of social stratification, which engage several dimensions (socio-economic status, ethnicity, education, age, gender, personality) and their interrelations. Moreover, analyses of inter-individual differences in response to similar stressful life conditions demonstrate the importance not only of available resources, but also the individual ability to mobilize appropriate resources, that is, the *ability of adaptation* (Baltes et al., 1998). Appropriate resources consist of coping strategies, i.e., self-concept, social network or support, personality traits, and learned socio-cognitive regulations (see Hooker & McAdams, 2003; Sapin, Spini & Widmer, 2007). Based on previous findings on stress and vulnerability (e.g., Serido; Almedia & Wethington, 2004; Keyes, 1998), we hypothesize that the extent to which individuals are able to mobilize appropriate resources is a strong indicator of their vulnerability to the experience of hazardous or stressful conditions (Alwang et al., 2001).

#### 4.2. Operationalization of the model

In this last section we propose indicators and dimensions to address gender differential vulnerabilities in work and family careers. Our dependant variables at the micro level are *decrease in income*, *decrease in socio-economic status*, *unemployment spells*, and *underemployment*. We focus on significant gains and losses in earnings, entry into unemployment, chances of exiting unemployment, and the risk of poverty. In particular, we would like to assess the likelihood of re-entering a job after a phase spent out of the labor force or in paid leave, The analytical model depicts the resources exchanged between the individual and the following institutions: social policies, market, family, and formal education and learning. The flows include financial resources devoted to current consumption and to build financial assets, skills and knowledge (immediate, but also invested in human capital), social capital to provide access to additional resources in terms of support, goods, housing, care giving services, and information for individual decision-making (PRI, 2004). This is a first step towards developing our multi-level model and thus our list of indicators serves as a basis from which to proceed towards a more fine-tuned analytical model.

a) **Social policies:** at the macro level (country or regional depending on the local institutional arrangements and data availability) we are particularly interested in *employment and family policies*. These include, first, entitlements to *child related policies*: these include maternal, paternal and parental leave provisions; we would like to compare the relative generosity of leaves as compared to the average wage. Since the full-time equivalent value of child-related leave may refer to different lengths of time and rates of payment, we prefer to employ the total length of child-related leave available for mothers (paid or unpaid) in order to measure the importance countries attribute to the need for parental time devoted to childcare in the months following childbirth. As a third component, we employ the full-time equivalent of the leave available to fathers only, to estimate the institutional efforts towards gender equity in enhancing the compatibility between work and family. The recent introduction of extended phases of paid leave or temporary career interruptions is a novelty from of the 1990s only,

Furthermore, we will employ a composite measure of *childcare provisions* and *preschool services*, which can be derived from the total spending on service, as a share of the annual GDP. We suggest that spending per child is split into the provision of educational services for preschool children and formal childcare services for children under 3 (OECD Family Database as at October 2009).

Finally, we suggest employing overall *income support* received by families through the benefits and tax system as independent variables at country level. Of special interest here are family-based transfers to poverty-reduction in terms of support given to low-income



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families compared to others. Such family-based transfers can be measured by the ratio between the income support granted to a family with a maximum income of 25% of the average wage and the support received by a family earning twice the average income.

b) **The market:** The independent variables will be measured at the country level. For the prediction of the socio-economic situation we are interested in *labor market outcomes* and *exchange of goods and service (household consumption)*. Indicators at country-level for *labor market outcomes* are for instance women's labor force participation (age 25-54), mothers' labor force participation (distinguishing mothers' groups according to the age of the youngest child), and poverty by type of household (double earning couples, lone parent households, etc.). Indicators for *household consumption* include the exchange of goods and services, housing, and most care giving. Indicators at micro-level are the amount of on-the-job experience and training, professional network, and mentoring relationships. These affect *the decrease in income*, *the decrease in status*, *unemployment spells*, and *underemployment*. However, these factors are insufficient in capturing the complexity of market flows (Grunow and Sørensen, 2006). Thus, we suggest to look at additional variables related to family and education.

c) **The Family:** Resources of family members are assumed to have two main dimensions: *living conditions* and *family responsibilities*. For the assessment of living conditions we would like to measure the relative level of achieved education of partners, housing, leisure consumption (food and vacations for instance). As a second dimension, we suggest *family responsibilities*, mainly determined by number of children, age of youngest child, dual career or male breadwinner orientation and the proximity of grandmothers as they may assume child-rearing responsibilities (as one example of social capital).

d) **Formal education and learning:** Finally a strong determinant of work careers is education associated with higher flexibility to adjust to changes in the labor market. Important indicators are public funded training programs and the presence of investments in this area.

Taken together, we believe that familial, educational and socio-economic factors determine an individual's ability to mobilize personal resources to positively respond to changed labor market demands and to overcome vulnerabilities in work and family life.

### 4.3. Implications and Challenges

One important implication of including indicators concerns the at times divergent effects of employment and family policy measures on the individual and household resource set. The border between the two sets of policies is often unclear because of the possible unintended consequences of employment policies on family development and vulnerability,

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and *vice versa*. To give just one example: promoting extended parental leaves in a setting where it is generally women who take them, may have as an indirect effect to decrease on women employment participation rates. Therefore we shall be careful to include as much as possible related policies in order to estimate their overall effect on vulnerability and resources. Another challenge concerns the distinction between individual and household vulnerability. Household members may be differentially exposed to stressors and the same factors which may benefit men may translate in a decrease in the well being of women or their children. The opposite of course can be true as well.

A major challenge of our model is certainly represented by secondary data collection. Data availability is an issue when looking at specific meso and macro level indicators. While panel data are increasingly filling the gap for longitudinal data at the individual level on a number of dimensions, long-term time series of finely defined regional indicators are still more the exception than the rule. Our ambition to use household, network and regional level has to account for data limitation. Some meso indicators can be constructed from reasonably large sample based survey representative at the regional level. There are a few Institutions that are currently engaged in collecting longitudinal contextual databases (for instance the Gender and Generation Program of the Max Planck Institute for Demographic Research as far as socio-demographic, economic and policy indicators are concerned; see <http://www.demogr.mpg.de/cgi-bin/databases/cdb/cdb.php>; 21.02.2010). A second challenge will be the multilevel longitudinal modeling for a number of different outcomes (employment and family outcomes in particular).

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*Please cite as conference presentation.*

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