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Working life histories from SHARELIFE: a retrospective panel*

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Abstract

Individuals interviewed in the third wave of the SHARE survey, called SHARELIFE, are asked to report relevant events about their entire life, starting from early childhood to the time of the interview. The life-history nature of this survey is a novelty in social sciences and opens new possibilities in terms of research. This paper describes in detail the construction of a panel dataset spanning the entire working life of SHARELIFE respondents, discussing all the relevant assumptions needed to reshape the public release data into such a format. We then discuss how new research venues could stem from such a dataset and what distinguishes retrospective panel data from standard panel data.

Keywords: panel data, retrospective interview, dataset management

JEL Classification: C81, C83

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1. Introduction

SHARELIFE is the third wave of SHARE (Survey of Health, Ageing and Retirement in Europe) and provides life-history information about a representative sample of about 27,000 respondents aged 50 or over and living in Europe. The domains of interest include family relationships, housing, working history, health and health care. SHARELIFE is released as an individual-level dataset organizing sequences of life events in a flat file format (Stuck, Zuber, Korbmacher, Hunkler, Kneip and Schröder, 2010). As an example, the type of job (employee, civil servant or self-employed) is looped over all working episodes and the information is stored as a set of variables for each individual in the sample.

The life history nature of SHARELIFE is a novelty in social sciences, and it already generated a number of important contributions: Börsch-Supan, Brandt, Hank and Schröder (2011), Brandt and Börsch-Supan (2013) and Mira and Weber (forthcoming) collect studies using SHARELIFE and covering a wide spectrum of interesting topics. The way the dataset should be rearranged and used strictly depends on the research question at hand. There are at least four approaches to exploit the wealth of information available in the data.

The first approach consists of using SHARELIFE as the third wave of a traditional survey: longitudinal SHARE respondents are observed four times (in 2004/5, 2006/7, in 2008/9 with SHARELIFE and in 2010/11), therefore data can be arranged in a way to study transitions on key variables over a decade by using each wave as a separate observation. As an example, Meschi, Padula and Pasini (2013) rearrange information relative to current labour market status in SHARELIFE to be comparable with waves 1, 2 and 4 of SHARE, and then study the individual labour market participation dynamics over the period 2004-2011.

The second approach comes from the fact that SHARELIFE collects information about events occurring throughout the respondent's life that can be related to other individual outcomes both at the time the event refers to or later in life. Angelini, Laferrère and Weber (2013) focus on first home-ownership episodes and study the individual determinants of how the property was acquired, including demographic characteristics at the time of first home-ownership and parental background. Cavapozzi, Garrouste and Paccagnella (2011) analyze how parental background affects the time spent in full time education by respondents and the income dispersion at their first job. Cavapozzi, Fiume, Garrouste and Weber (2011) show how the timing of the first investment in risky assets is related with parental background and

mathematical abilities of respondents during childhood. Havari and Peracchi (2012) collect information about early childhood deprivation (i.e. having experienced period of hunger) and relate it to health and income at older ages. Brugiavini, Pasini, Trevisan and Weber (2013) study whether economic downturns occurring at key moments in life, such as at the time of entering the labour market, and periods of financial distress have long run “scarring” effects relating this information to health and income observed in wave 4 of SHARE.

The third approach to exploit the life history nature of SHARELIFE is to build an event-dataset. Brugiavini, Pasini and Trevisan (2013) study the effect of maternity leave legislation on time spent at home after childbirth. In order to do so, they rearrange SHARELIFE into a birth-panel: each female respondent contributes as many observations as maternity episodes she experienced throughout her life. Such a dataset allows the researcher to account for characteristics that are contemporaneous to each event (e.g. age and employment status of the mother and the legislation in place at time of childbirth in a given country) and to relate this information to the sequence of successive events and to potential outcomes later in life.

The fourth approach is to fully exploit the retrospective nature of SHARELIFE by building a “retrospective panel”: each respondent contributes as many observations as there are years of age from birth to the age at which they are observed at the moment of the interview. A retrospective panel is useful when the focus of the analysis is a low frequency phenomenon: as an example, it may be of interest to study the effect of changes in marital status on labour market participation, health or other outcomes. Since marital status changes only a few times in the life of an individual, a standard panel is likely to be too short to observe a sufficient longitudinal variation at individual level to run such an analysis, while a retrospective panel overcomes this problem. Moreover, the fact that individuals face different public policies at different ages is likely to affect important life-cycle processes that are recorded in SHARELIFE. Alessie, Angelini and van Santen (2012) use information on first wage at each successive job spell to build a retrospective panel that allows them to estimate savings and wealth accumulation over the life-cycle and to study the displacement effect of pension wealth on household savings. Cavapozzi, Trevisan and Weber (2013) derive an analogue retrospective dataset to show how purchasing a life insurance policy at a given stage of the life-cycle shapes individuals’ future propensity to invest in stocks and mutual funds. Their retrospective panel allows estimating the relationship of interest within a duration framework with time-varying explanatory variables.

This paper details the procedure to build a retrospective panel collecting information about the evolution of working conditions, ranging from labour market status to wages and job-specific characteristics. Section 2 describes the content of the dataset and the way each variable was generated starting from the SHARELIFE public release 1 and, whenever needed, the public release 2.5.0 of SHARE wave 1 and wave 2. Section 3 deals with some methodological issues regarding the dataset construction. Section 4 discusses the potentials of the retrospective panel and concludes.

2. Working Life Histories retrospective panel

SHARELIFE respondents are asked to report a number of characteristics regarding each job spell they face throughout their life, i.e. starting at the time they finished full time education up to the time of the interview. Observations are then organized as an individual-level dataset where job spell characteristics are reported in successive sets of variables numbered accordingly. Reshaping the individual-level dataset into a retrospective panel, though conceptually straightforward, requires the researcher to make some assumptions and to find the correct way to treat loops and single events. More precisely, the procedure we used to build the working life retrospective panel can be summarized in three main phases:

- Creation of a “base” person-year dataset containing all individuals interviewed in SHARELIFE;
- Creation of an event-dataset containing information drawn from the working history section of SHARELIFE;
- Merging of the two datasets and creation of the related variables

The starting point are the 26,768 individuals interviewed in SHARELIFE and the demographic characteristics reported in the coverscreen module. We select the person and household identifiers, year of interview, year of birth, gender and country of residence at the time of the interview. Using the year of interview and the year of birth, we define for each respondent the age at the time of the interview. The next step is to expand the dataset in order to have each individual contributing as many observations as the years of age from birth to the age at the time of interview. The base dataset obtained contains 1,779,527 person-year observations. Table 1 reports the distribution of individuals and person-year observations by country.

Table 1: Number of individuals and number of person-year observations by country

Country	Number of individuals	N. of person-year observations
Sweden	1,889	129,247
Denmark	2,135	139,438
Germany	1,848	122,696
Netherlands	2,207	145,556
Belgium	2,824	188,961
France	2,475	165,423
Switzerland	1,295	85,389
Austria	841	57,279
Italy	2,489	167,055
Spain	2,033	137,890
Greece	2,948	194,096
Poland	1,912	123,500
Czech Republic	1,872	122,997
Total	26,768	1,779,527

The second step of the procedure consists of rearranging the information contained in the SHARELIFE public release variables generated by the job spell loops. We first cleaned the data paying particular attention to the starting and ending years of each job episode.

² Secondly, we reshaped the original retirement and employment section dataset in order to obtain an event database, where each respondent contributes as many observations as job episodes she experienced over her life. In other words, each row of the event database corresponds to a job spell and contains information on start and end date of the spell, job characteristics (such as wage, working hours, etc.), plus additional information on year of retirement, unemployment and benefits.

In the final step of the procedure, the base dataset is merged with the working spell dataset using the person identifier (“*mergeid*”) and the starting year of each job episode as “linking” variables. Secondly, we generated the variables of interest. The final dataset (i.e. the retrospective panel) is composed by 1,779,257 person-year observations and contains 27 variables.

A first set of variables, such as person and household identifiers, gender, year of birth, age and year, is part of the base dataset built on the basis of the coverscreen module. A second group of

² The details about the data cleaning process are reported in section 3

variables defines at each year the job market status of the respondent. More precisely, the variable “*in_education*” is a dummy that takes value 1 if the individual is still in education and 0 otherwise and it has been built using the information on the age at which the respondent finished full time education (from *sl_re002*). When the original variable was coded as refuse or don’t know, we used information on the years spent in full time education collected in previous waves of SHARE. “*Working*” is a dummy variable taking value 1 if the respondent in a given year was working and 0 otherwise. This variable is based on the information on starting and ending year of each job episode collected in the working history section of SHARELIFE. Respondents are asked to report their status between each job spell and at the end of their last job. Based on this information we generated an “*unemployed*” dummy and a “*retired*” dummy. The latter has been derived combining SHARELIFE information on the ending year of the last job and information on the year in which the respondent retired from work recorded in previous waves. Being more precise, we set the year of retirement equal to the year in which the last job spell ended if the respondent declared to have retired right after the end of this job. When this information is not available we used wave 2 question on year of retirement (i.e. ep329 – “*In what year did you retire?*”).

Thanks to the reshaping of the working section of SHARELIFE done in the second step of the procedure, we can determine the order of the job episodes (see the variable “*ordjob*”) and attach to each job spell its characteristics, such as industry, job title (i.e. employee, self-employed or civil servant), reason left job, first monthly wage and its currency for employees, first monthly income and its currency for self-employed. The variable “*working_hours*” reports whether an individual in a given job spell and year was working full time or part time. This is built using information on changes in working hours and on the year in which these changes occurred. For each job episode, the variable “*mainjob*” takes value 1 if the respondent defined a given job spell as her main job and 0 otherwise. Respondents are asked to report the last wage earned at the end of their main job (and the currency in which it is expressed). This information is then attached to the proper job spell in the retrospective panel using “*mainjob*” as linking variable. Finally, we can merge the first pension benefit (i.e. “*first_pension*”) and its currency to the proper person-year observation using the information on the year in which respondents received the first pension benefit derived from previous waves. Table 2 describes the variables contained in the retrospective panel and lists, for each of them, the variables in the SHARE waves 1 and 2 and SHARELIFE questionnaires used to build them.

Tab. 2: Retrospective panel variables: description and corresponding questionnaire variables

Variables	Description	Questionnaire variables
Mergeid	Person identifier fix across modules and waves	
Hhid3	Household identifier wave 3	
Yrbirth	Year of birth respondent	yrbirth (cv_r module)
Gender	Gender respondent	gender (cv_r module), sl_st011_ (st module)
Age	Age respondent	int_year_w3, yrbirth (cv_r module)
Year	Year	yrbirth (cv_r module), age
Country	Country of residence at the time of interview	country (cv_r module)
Ordjob	Job spell numbering	sl_re011_1-sl_re011_20 (re module)
Industry	Job industry	sl_re014_1-sl_re014_20 (re module)
Job_title	Employee, civil servant or self-employed	sl_re015_1-sl_re015_20 (re module)
First_wage	First monthly wage in job	sl_re021_1-sl_re021_20 (re module)
Currency_fw	Currency of first monthly wage in job	sl_re022c_1-sl_re022c_20 (re module)
Reason_endjob	Reason left job	sl_re031_1-sl_re031_20 (re module)
Lastwage	Monthly wage at the end of main job	sl_re041_ (re module)
Lastincome	Monthly income at the end of main job	sl_re043_ (re module)
Currency_lw	Currency of monthly wage at the end of main job	sl_re042_, sl_re022c_ (re module)
Currency_li	Currency of monthly income at the end of main job	sl_re044_, sl_re024c_ (re module)
First_income	First monthly income in job	sl_re023_1-sl_re023_20 (re module)
Currency_fi	Currency of first monthly income in job	sl_re024c_1-sl_re024c_20 (re module)
First_pension	First monthly pension benefit when retired	sl_re036_1-sl_re036_10 (re module), ep213_ (ep module wave 1 and wave 2)
Currency_fp	Currency of first monthly pension benefit when retired	sl_re037c_1-sl_re037c_10 (re module)
In_education	In full time education	sl_re002_ (re module), dn041_raw (dn module wave 2)
Working	Working spell	sl_re011_1-sl_re011_20, sl_re026_1-sl_re026_20 (re module)
Working_hours	Full time or part time	sl_re016_1-sl_re016_20, sl_re018_1-sl_re018_20, sl_re020_1-sl_re020_20 (re module)
Unemployed	Unemployment spell	sl_re031_1-sl_re031_20, sl_re033_1-sl_re033_17, sl_re006_, sl_re007_, sl_re035_1-sl_re035_10
Retired	Retirement spell	ep329 (ep module wave 2), sl_re031_1-sl_re031_20, sl_re033_1-sl_re033_17, sl_re039a_1-sl_re039a_10
Mainjob	Main job spell	sl_re040_, sl_re011_1-sl_re011_20, sl_re026_1-sl_re026_20

3. Methodological issues

Life history interviews typically suffer of recall bias and other potential problems relating to the ability of respondents of remembering correctly details about events that took place several years in the past. Havari and Mazzonna (2011) conduct a careful and detailed analysis on SHARELIFE, concluding that though present, these kind of problems are not hampering the usefulness and validity of the dataset we are using. Still, missing data and inconsistencies especially regarding the

dates at which job spell began and finished deserves a special attention in our exercise. This is because as individual observations expand to several person-year records in the retrospective panel, so do data problems. As an example, although a missing value in the date at which a job spell began affects a single observation in the original SHARELIFE dataset, it propagates to all the person-year entries in the retrospective panel referring to this job spell.

SHARELIFE overall data quality is remarkably good: missing data (due to individuals who do not know or refuse to answer) affect all variables, but the prevalence is not very high (around 1%-2%), with the exception of the monetary variables, such as first wage, first income, first pension benefit, who have percentages of missing values close to 25 per cent.

While for most of the variables it is not possible to retrieve the missing information, we were able to fill most of the missing values for variables reporting job spells starting and ending year by making some assumptions and using information from other questions recorded in the working history section of SHARELIFE. In particular,

- If the **starting year of the first job spell was missing**, we used information about the age at which the respondent finished full time education and on the gap between the end of full time education and the entry in the labour market;
- If the **starting year of any other job spell was missing**, we used information on the gap between jobs. In other words, if the respondent declared she started the new job right after the old one, we assumed that the starting year of the new job was equal to the year in which the previous job finished. We did not make any assumption about respondents who reported that they started the new job more than 6 months after or before the end of the previous one, thus coding as missing the starting year in the retrospective panel too.
- Consistently, if **the ending year of any intermediate job spell** was missing, we used information on the gap between jobs: if the respondent moved from job to job, we assumed that the ending year of the previous job was equal to the starting year of the new one.
- Finally, if the **ending year of the last job spell was missing** and the respondent retired right after, we used the information about the year of retirement to fill the missing value.

We detected two types of inconsistencies in the individual dataset. First, there were some overlapping between working spells and retirement, or working spells and unemployment, or

retirement and unemployment. Unfortunately, there is not enough information in the data to solve these types of inconsistencies. This implies that they appear also in the retrospective panel. More precisely, 1.9 percent of person-year observations have an overlap between working and retirement status, for 0.1 of person-year observations percent there is an overlap between working and unemployment status and for 1.7 percent there is an overlap between retirement and unemployment. Secondly, sometimes starting and ending years of job spell were inverted, or the new job was reported to have a starting date prior to the end of the new job spell, while the answer to the direct question about gaps between job spells report that this was not the case. In these cases, we made some value changes. More precisely:

- If the starting and ending year of a job spell were clearly inverted after cross checking with the end date of the previous spell and starting year of the following one, we considered it as a typing error and we changed them in order to have the right timing;
- If the new job started before the end of the previous one and the respondent declared to have started the new job right after the old one, we changed the starting year and set it equal to the ending year of the previous job.

Table 3 summarizes the number of corrections we discussed above for each variable.

Table 3: Summary of the corrections for sl_re006_ (Start of first paid job), sl_re011_# (Year started job spell #), sl_re026_# (Year end job spell #)

Variables	Non-missing values		Missing values (Don't know and refusals)	
	N. of original non-missing values	N. of value changes	N. of original missing values	N. of missing values set to real values
sl_re006_	23778	727	36	0
sl_re011_1	24169	75	175	54
sl_re011_2	17053	412	64	15
sl_re011_3	11119	473	32	6
sl_re011_4	6929	271	13	0
sl_re011_5	4198	184	9	0
sl_re011_6	2451	118	6	0
sl_re011_7	1449	75	2	1
sl_re011_8	847	55	3	0
sl_re011_9	475	32	0	0
sl_re011_10	277	22	0	0

sl_re011_11	166	11	0	0
sl_re011_12	93	2	1	0
sl_re011_13	65	6	0	0
sl_re011_14	39	5	0	0
sl_re011_15	23	2	0	0
sl_re011_16	14	3	0	0
sl_re011_17	8	0	0	0
sl_re011_18	5	1	0	0
sl_re011_19	2	0	0	0
sl_re011_20	2	0	0	0
sl_re026_1	24216	2217	129	112
sl_re026_2	17064	2185	52	33
sl_re026_3	11121	1608	31	25
sl_re026_4	6932	1102	10	10
sl_re026_5	4203	735	4	4
sl_re026_6	2452	441	5	5
sl_re026_7	1450	279	1	1
sl_re026_8	850	189	0	0
sl_re026_9	475	115	0	0
sl_re026_10	277	58	0	0
sl_re026_11	166	32	0	0
sl_re026_12	94	19	0	0
sl_re026_13	65	14	0	0
sl_re026_14	39	12	0	0
sl_re026_15	23	3	0	0
sl_re026_16	14	2	0	0
sl_re026_17	8	1	0	0
sl_re026_18	5	2	0	0
sl_re026_19	2	0	0	0
sl_re026_20	2	0	0	0

Most of the changes for the variable sl_re026_ are due to the fact that when the respondent declared to be still in that job (code 9997) we set the variables equal to the interview year. Finally, there are some value changes for the variable sl_re006_, which reports when the respondent started the first paid job (i.e. if she started the first paid job straight after leaving full time education, if there was a gap of 6 months or more before starting the first job, if she started first job before left full time education). If the respondent declared to have started the first job before the end of full time education, while the starting date of that job recorded in sl_re011_ was subsequent to the end of the schooling period, we assumed that the starting date of the first job was the correct information and we amended the value of the variable sl_re006_.

4. Discussion and conclusions

We rearranged the working history section of SHARELIFE in order to derive a retrospective dataset consisting of almost 1,800,000 person-year observations. Each respondent provides the sample with as many observations as her years of age at the time of the SHARELIFE interview. In this dataset every observation describes the labour market status of respondents at a given year of age.

SHARELIFE is released as an individual-level dataset organizing sequences of life events in a flat file format. As an example, the type of job (employee, civil servant or self-employed) is looped over all working episodes and the information is stored as a set of variables for each individual in the sample. In our retrospective panel, this information has been rearranged in order to define the variable “*job_title*”, which tells us whether a working respondent at a given year of age was employee, civil servant or self-employed. It is worth noting that as long as different employment spells have been experimented by the same respondent during her working history, the “*job_title*” variable might exhibit time-variation.

Information about past events collected in other sections of SHARELIFE can be merged to the proposed retrospective panel. The resulting dataset might be suited to perform empirical analyses involving variables whose time-variation appears relevant only over a long time-span. Let us suppose we want to investigate the relationship between labour market status and individual characteristics, such as marital status, number of children and health. A possible approach is to use a cross-sectional dataset, but it would be of use to describe the relationship of interest at a given point in time and discard the longitudinal dimension. Even long panel datasets, such as the American Panel Study of Income Dynamics (PSID), are likely not to exhibit enough longitudinal variation at the individual level over a sizeable sample, for instance due to attrition. Instead, combining the proposed retrospective panel with the accordingly-resaped family relationships and health sections of SHARELIFE provides an ideal support to address this issue since it allows defining indicators of the individual characteristics of interest at each year of age of all SHARELIFE respondents. The relationship of interest can be analyzed by using convenient panel data techniques to control for unobserved heterogeneity in the estimation.

In addition, the information in our retrospective dataset can be complemented by information about the institutions and macroeconomic conditions individuals are confronted with. Indeed, we can associate individual characteristics for each year of age with time-varying and country-specific variables describing the institutions (e.g. labour market, pension system, housing market)

respondents have faced throughout their lives. This turns out to be an additional instrument to assess how policy reforms implemented in SHARELIFE countries since the Second World War affected individuals' decisions in the short and in the long run.

While we think the retrospective panel is a useful tool for applied research, still its nature requires some cautions. First of all, SHARELIFE offers a representative sample of the current population of individuals aged 50 or over in Europe. Although we can reconstruct the whole working life history of the respondents in our sample born in a given birth-cohort, this information provides representative figures only for the population of individuals of that birth-cohort who survived until the time of SHARELIFE interview. Furthermore, the longitudinal dimension of a standard panel is determined by the sampling design, and therefore the external validity of any statistical analysis can be guaranteed as long as attrition is accounted for (e.g. by using an appropriate set of weights). In the proposed retrospective panel the number of observations referring to the same respondent depends on her age at the time of the interview, which is a random variable depending on the age structure of the sampled population. Such a distinctive feature may impact on the representativeness of the sample and on large sample properties of the statistical methodology used to conduct the analysis. Given the novelty of this type of data, future methodological research in this field is needed to run sound and convincing empirical analyses.

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