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The Life Course Research Design for Transitional Labour Market Research

Abstract

This article draws on research that documents the work, financial and personal benefits and skill trajectories of trade and bachelor graduates' for the ten years after completion of their initial education. The primary aim of the project is to better understand how people draw on their initial education and training. We suggest that while there is some value in using quantitative methods, one of our key objectives has been to develop a qualitative or interpretive research design that allows a better understanding why and how workers seek the employment they do, why they pursue promotion or acquire additional skills and why they change their occupational careers. We argue in this article that use of an interpretive approach provides rich in-depth data that can be used to follow the decision-making steps taken by people as they proceed through their working lives. In this article we consider the benefits methodologically and conceptually of adopting what is referred to as a life course research design.

Since the early 1990s, labour market policy and research in Europe and Australia has been reshaped by the evolution of a life-cycle approach to what is conceptualised as transitional labour markets. This approach represents labour market dynamics in terms of 'transition flows' between various kinds of employment status (for example 'part-time', 'full-time', 'fixed term' and 'continuing' paid work (etc), and non-market productive activities (like child-care, community participation, education (Hakim, 2002; Mayer, 2000, 2003; Schmid, 2006). This theoretical and research frame further acknowledges that patterns of living and working no longer follow a 'traditional linear model' understood in terms of successive phases of education, marriage, work and retirement, but rather involves more complex transitions and 'social risks' that occur across the life course (Walters, 2002; Winterton, 2004; Ziguras, 2006). Paralleling literature this we see similar developments in the area of youth studies and particularly in the work of writers documenting youth transition. More recently writers like Coles (1995), Jones and Wallace, (1992), France (2008) refer to the increasing complexity of social life in late modernity and its impact on the changing experience of youth and patterns of school to work transitions. At a global level changes to the labour market, social institutions (family) and traditional 'social roles' have seen a 'major restructuring' of how young people move from education to the labour market, replacing descriptions of relatively straight forward and linear transitions from adolescence and school to adulthood and secure employment we see 'youth transition' described in terms of a 'biographical project' referred to in terms of young people 'navigating' their own career and lifestyles (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002).

Against this evolving conceptual framework, researchers and policy makers have foregrounded a number of specific issues like unemployment and underemployment, youth at risk and more recently skill shortage (Allen Consulting Group, 2004; Bartel, 2000; Richardson, 2007). There is now evidence for example that Australia along with other western economies is facing a skill shortage that will, unless addressed have negative effects on future economic growth (Australian Industry Group (AIG), 2004; de la Fuente & Ciccone, 2003; Perrett, 2004; Richardson, 2007; Senate Standing Committee, 2003; Shah & Burke, 2003). Other policy makers and researchers (Blundell, Dearden, & Sianesi, 2004; McIntosh, 2002) have addressed questions about worker retention, or have tried to assess the value of education to workers understood in neo-classical economic terms as the return to investment or in the language of social inclusion -human capital. The conceptual issues involved in developing a life-cycle approach to analyzing a transitional labour market or evaluating the costs and benefits of different kinds of transition are complex enough, the methodological issues at stake in describing or explaining these flows, or assessing the benefits of different kinds of education and training is a second order of difficulty. In this

paper we consider the benefits methodologically and conceptually of adopting what is referred to as a life course research design (Giele & Elder, 1998; Somekh & Lewin, 2005).

WHY A LIFE COURSE RESEARCH DESIGN?

To date much of the research of transitional labour markets has tended to take the form of large-scale quantitative research designs. This response reflects in part the need to generate large scale credible empirical data. Much valuable work has gone into projects to assemble large-scale data sets like the Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) (HILDA, 2006), project, or the Longitudinal Survey of Australian Youth (LSAY) (ACER, 2007; Fullarton, Walker, Ainley, & Hillman, 2003; McMillan & Marks, 2003) project. These data sets have undoubtedly provided a quantitative basis for documenting or analyzing changing patterns of flows into and out of the workforce (Senate Standing Committee, 2003).

Data sets like HILDA for example provide large point-in-time cross sectional surveys that compare, among other things, average occupational wage levels or permit some estimation of returns to investment by individuals of their education and training. However, while these data sets provide an aggregate or 'wide-screen picture' of labour market transitions, they provide little insight into the ways ordinary people evaluate options, make choices about education or employment, or experience and/or report. Furthermore, these data sets do not enable us to follow career paths which might see a skilled wage based trades employee become a salary packaged manager with higher order skills and qualifications, or that see skilled graduates working in large institutions become self-employed specialists. Nor finally do such studies reveal the experiences, meanings or sense making people have when deciding about whether to have a child and work full-time, or to 'do a sea change' and change their life styles completely on the basis of non-financial criteria.

The disposition to collect large-scale data sets and the consequential inability to account for the agential characteristics of social processes (like evaluating options, having feelings about the consequences of certain choices or choosing, for example, between pursuing educational options or seeking entry to the labour market) reflects a long-standing set of philosophical and methodological assumptions prevalent in the social sciences like sociology and economics. The linkage between quantitative research methods, the privileging of scientism, and the preference for 'structuralist' and 'causal' (i.e., probabilistic) explanations in sociology has been endlessly described and critiqued. Manent (1998) for example wrote about the appeal of structuralist explanations to sociologists. Many sociologists in search of explanatory potency or disciplinary credibility have promoted the idea that social structures can be used to 'explain' human action/social change/political change. Conventional scientists assume that:

- i) 'employment' and/or the 'unemployment rate' are objective and stable 'social facts', and
- ii) actors are constrained to act in ways which structural variables (like socio-economic status, education level, sub-cultural contexts, biological factors or family status) impel them to do.

As Manent (1998) indicates, these presumptions underwrite what he refers to as a 'spectator' model of social science in which the social scientist:

... adopts the viewpoint of the spectator. The viewpoint of the spectator is all the more pure and scientific in that it accords no real initiative whatever to the agent or agents, but considers their actions or their works as the necessary effect of necessary causes. (Manent, 1998, p. 54)

As researchers involved in the *Working Lives Project* we were intent on documenting and better understanding how people draw on their education and training and also what other factors came into play as they engage in employment and career development. While there is some value in using some quantitative methods one of our key objectives was to develop a qualitative or interpretive research design to understand why and how workers seek employment in particular occupations, pursue promotion or acquire additional skills or change their occupational careers. Use of an interpretive approach can provide rich in-depth

data that can follow the sense making and decision-making steps taken by people as they proceed through their working lives. In this paper we consider the benefits methodologically and conceptually of adopting what is referred to as a life course research design (Giele & Elder, 1998; Shacklock & Thorp, 2005; Somekh & Lewin, 2005)

This project investigates two matched cohorts of young people over the first ten years of their working lives after they completed their initial education. The first group is made up of people who have completed a 'traditional' i.e., VET (Vocational Education Training) sector trades qualification. The other group comprises people who have completed a university bachelor's degree. Both groups were students at RMIT who graduated in the period 1994/1996. It was decided to constrain the longitudinal study to the first ten to twelve years of working life on the grounds that the decade after education and training involves such central, if sometimes volatile or 'risk-laden' life-cycle transitions as entering into long-term sexual/marital relationships, starting families, or establishing businesses or consolidating a career.

The detailed aims of the project include first, analysing the patterns of labour market participation between and within each cohort group over a ten year period. This involves elucidating significant career and occupational changes including appointments, promotions, transitions from one industry to another or changes in status from employee to manager or employee to self-employed or employer. The reasons given for these changes will also be analysed. Investigators will also be engaged in analysing and comparing the patterns of skill and qualification acquisition between and within each cohort group over this ten year period. Finally, the project will be able to report on whether there were particular and/or differential occupational, skill social or economic benefits attendant on taking either a trade qualification or a bachelor's degree across the first ten years of working life? In short, the objective is to offer a dynamic portrait of how people get jobs, seek promotion, or additional skill development, make career changes, and in general derive a range of benefits from their education or training. It will also try to identify what the motivations were or whether there were critical events that influenced their decision to seek promotion or make occupational or career changes.

LIFE COURSE RESEARCH DESIGN

The *Working Lives* study adopted a life course research design in order to collect rich in-depth data about the dynamics of people's working lives with a view to trying to identify significant transitions and social risks which impacted on peoples' careers.

The concept of life course refers to "a sequence of socially defined events and roles which people enact over time" (Giele & Elder, 1998, p. 22). The life course is viewed as a social phenomenon: it is defined as 'the intersection of social and historical factors with personal biography' (Elder, 1985 cited in George, 1993, p. 358). In this respect a life course perspective emphasises the importance of the wider social and historical influences on people's lives *and* the importance of human agency and the bi-directional relationship between individuals and their settings. Giele and Elder (1998) notes that the study of the life course recognises that: ... any point in the life span must be viewed dynamically as the consequence of past experience and future expectation as well as the integration of individual motive with external constraint (p. 19). Life course research tends to focus on real time, the ongoing present, aiming to capture the life in process, often through repeated interviews, in order to examine complex relationships (Biesta, Hodkinson, & Goodson, 2005).

A central concern for sociologists of the life course is the socially recognised sequences of transitions which in the past were seen to be more strongly age differentiated than now. Two key concepts within the life course are 'transitions', (which denote changes in status, and thus tend to be more discrete occurrences), and 'trajectories' (which are longer-term patterns of stability and change, often including several transitions). For instance, job shifts (including vertical and lateral moves, and movement in and out of the labour force) constitute 'transitions' while 'careers' are the trajectories within which job shifts or transitions occur (George, 1993).

Life course studies seek to identify constraints that operate on a person's life decision making and also the variability between individuals under similar conditions. Such studies are concerned with the results of changing life course patterns for social structure and institutions – that is, issues about how micro outcomes affect macro configurations (George, 1993; Mayer, 2003).

Life events are the basic building blocks for descriptive and explanatory analysis. The data required for life course research can be said to be "*events* combined in *event histories* or *trajectories* that are then compared across persons or groups by noting differences in timing, duration, and rates of change" (Giele & Elder, 1998, p. 3)

Giele and Elder (1998) describe a four-part model of the life course that has emerged from extensive empirical research and theorising. They propose that the key elements that influence the life course are

- Location in time and place: including history, social structure, and culture.
- Linked lives: the interaction of individuals with societal institutions and social groups (friendships and networks).
- Human agency: the active pursuit of personal goals, and the sense of self.
- Timing of lives: chronologically ordered events that include both passive and active adaptation to external events, in order to reach individual or collective goals.

According to Giele and Elder (1998) there is consensus among life course researchers that data collection should encompass the following:

- historical context (location);
- relationships in family and work and other social settings (linked lives);
- health, well being, subjective aspects of meaning and satisfaction (human agency);
- and event histories in the major domains of activity (timing of events).

Within each functional domain, such as family, occupation and residential moves, both the chronological time of incidence and the duration of events need to be recorded. These four substantive areas provided a sound framework for the data gathering to be undertaken in the current project.

Three different dimensions of age occur in the life course literature. Apart from biological age, the other two dimensions are period, referring to the distinctive historical and cultural events experienced by persons of a given age and cohort, and cohort, or the socially shared experiences of age peers. Cohort effects are due to the interaction of age and historical period. Life experiences vary across successive birth cohorts, with different birth years result in changing social and economic circumstances, and thus changing structures of opportunity for groups of individuals (Shanahan, Elder, & Miech, 1997).

An example of a current project using both approaches is 'Learning Lives: learning, identity, and agency in the life-course', funded in Britain by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) and seeking to understand how learning, in all its various forms, impacts on individual identities, on individual sense of agency and on the capacity to exert control over one's life. The qualitative research involves a series of in depth interviews with about 100 adults aged 25 plus, over a three year period from mid 2004, allowing researchers to follow the lives and learning of these people as it happens. The same periodic interviews are being used to collect both life history data and ongoing life and learning data (Hodkinson, 2005a, 2005b).

RESEARCH DESIGN: RETROSPECTIVE LONGITUDINAL DATA

A longitudinal framework is regarded as essential for life course research (Giele & Elder, 1998). The research design of the *Working Lives* project can be characterised as quasi-longitudinal, in that it includes a cross sectional survey of cohorts of individuals, to retrospectively collect longitudinal data.

Longitudinal data are repeated observations of a set of characteristics or events over a period of time. Increased interest in longitudinal studies has occurred because of growing recognition of the inadequacies of attempts to analyse dynamic social processes using static cross-sectional studies. The latter are inappropriate for studying patterns of change within cohorts, and cannot be used to resolve issues of causal order (Dale & Davies, 1994; Ruspini, 1999, 2000). Longitudinal analyses can include dependent variables measured not at a single, arbitrary point in time, corresponding to when a cross sectional survey was done, but over different time periods.

Longitudinal data can be collected retrospectively or prospectively. Prospective panel studies trace individuals and households through historical time, gathering information about them at regular intervals. These panel studies also often include, at the time of first contact, relevant retrospective information; for example the British Household Panel Study asked participants for life-time retrospective work-histories, and marital and fertility histories (Ruspini, 2000)

For life course research, longitudinal studies are seen to offer several advantages (Mayer, 2000, 2003). The rich and detailed data they yield could be used to better understand the complexities of overgeneralised accounts of life phases such as youth and middle age. Another advantage is these data can be analysed to counter the fragmentation of studies focused on particular life domains, such as education or work or family, by revealing the mutual interpenetration of these various life domains. And thirdly longitudinal data could provide a more comprehensive longer-term view of life patterns, thereby allowing a shift from a focus on smaller transitions to identifying longer-term effects, including persistent and cumulative advantage and disadvantage (Mayer, 2000)

A retrospective design has the advantages that it can cover a longer time span than a prospective panel, and retrospectively generated longitudinal data can be produced relatively instantly. Put succinctly, "It is cheaper and quicker to do catch-up samples than to launch a panel study and wait 30 years for the data"(Dempster-McClain & Moen, 1998, p. 150)

But there are also disadvantages, especially concerns about the quality and reliability of data collected retrospectively (Dex, 1995). Recall bias is a major problem: respondents may find it hard to accurately recall the timing of changes, especially changes in attitudes, motivations, and feelings (Blossfeld & Rohwer, 1995). There are also potential ambiguities in retrospective data. While the collection of retrospective data can refer to apparently simple factual recall of events in the past, it also involves the respondent looking back on and thinking about things in the past, and reviewing that past. In this latter sense, retrospective data are current, and influenced by present conditions. There is also an issue of circular causality, because it is difficult to disentangle the effects of present situation and emotions on people's reconstruction of the past, from the effects that previous experiences have on their current behaviour (Scott & Alwin, 1998).

Life and work histories require information about the sequence, number and timing of events, so that durations between events can be calculated. It is generally agreed that recording changes in status is most appropriate for events, when this change is more readily dated; according to the literature there is likely to be greater reliability when recording events in some domains, particularly in personal life, than in others such as employment status, perhaps because more ambiguities are possible in the latter. Awareness of some sources of bias can assist in improving the reliability of data: for instance, in dating transitions, it is reported that people's memories tend to be influenced by the reference period used in the survey instrument (Scott & Alwin, 1998).

Recording changes that are more of a process than an event are acknowledged as more problematic (Karweit & Kertzer, 1998). For instance a recent empirical study that compared retrospective and prospective data from a large sample of adolescents cautioned against the use of retrospective reports of psychological variables (Scott & Alwin, 1998). However, others claim that attitudinal data collected in this way can be reliable, if the attitudes are salient.

Conclusion

The Life cycle approach which has become increasingly popular since the 1990s represents labour market dynamics in terms of 'transition flows' between different employment statuses. It is also a theoretical and research frame that acknowledges that patterns of living and working no longer follow a 'traditional linear model' and argues that what we now see are complex transitions and 'social risks' that occur across the life course. It is an evolving conceptual framework that is still being developed and used in the context of other on going 'social problems' like unemployment and underemployment, skill shortages, worker retention and whether people are getting returns to investment in education and training.

We noted there are several methodological questions in this area of research that include how we can best explain these transitions or flows, and how we can assess the benefits of different types of education and training. It was also acknowledged that large scale data sets provide invaluable material, and point to the findings from projects like HILDA, the LSAY project and other large ABS data sets. While these kind of research provide valuable aggregate or 'wide-screen pictures' of labour market transitions and cross sectional surveys, they also have serious limitations.

Large scale data sets do not for example allow us to follow career paths which may see for example a skilled wage based trades employee become a salary packaged manager with higher skills and qualifications or provide insight into why people evaluate options, make choices about education or employment, or experience and/or report. Nor do they reveal the experiences, meanings or sense making people have when deciding about whether to care for a sick parent and engage in part-time work, or to do a complete 'sea change'. What they are 'outsiders' accounts that rely on causal explanations and which run the risk of overlook the influence of human agency. Researchers in the *Working Lives* project recognized the value of the interpretivist 'life course' approach for investigating ten years of the working lives of particular cohorts of Trade and Bachelor graduates.

This article endeavoured to contribute to the scholarly literature by providing a new (and neglected) perspective on labour market transitions and the experiences of work by arguing a case for the application of the life-cycle approach to this field. And, while life-cycle research is well established in the lifelong learning literature, and particularly in understanding the learning trajectories and experiences of adults it is rarely applied to understanding trajectories of work and the way individuals understand their experiences. In this way this article offered something distinctive to the literature.

Finally, while research on the *Working Lives* research project is now near completion we did not report on the findings. The aim of this article was to provide a conceptual discussion of the applicability of the life-cycle approach to this area, and to demonstrate the efficacy of the approach, rather than report on our method and findings about trajectories and waged work. This is because the task of reporting on the research findings is a large and complex and requires separate treatment which can be given in subsequent articles that detail case-studies and interviews which demonstrate the kind of deep meanings that can be obtained through a life-cycle approach.

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