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The end of active life as a status passage challenging life evaluation

Summary

The end of active life is a status passage from where occupational and private life are evaluated in retrospect. The evaluation should depend positively on the successes, and negatively on the failures experienced so far. The two hypotheses are examined and the question whether successes or failures determine the evaluation more strongly is answered empirically. Data are from the Cologne High School Panel (CHISP) which starts at age 16 and surveys successes and failures in life retrospectively in three waves at age 30, 43, 56, and 66; and life evaluation at age 66. 1013 respondents took part in all four waves. In the analysis, models for success, for failure, and for success and failure are computed such that the effect sizes of success and failures can be compared.

The occupational and private life evaluation are measured by questions with five response options between negative and positive. Because most respondents chose positive options, the distributions have been dichotomized and analysed by logistic regressions. In occupational life, success is measured by hourly income and occupational prestige at age 66; failure by the time of unemployment, family periods, waiting, and disability from 16 to 66. In private life, success is measured by partnership, marriage, and number of children at age 66; failure by the number of separations and of divorces from 16 to 66. All models control for gender.

The occupational life evaluation depends strongly on success and only slightly on failure, the private life evaluation more strongly on success than on failure. In both domains, thus, success more strongly predicts the life evaluation than failure. In conclusion, the results for the two life domains are compared and the question is discussed whether occupational failures can be measured objectively by time spans or must be supplemented by subjective measures of the respondents' interpretation.

If “active life” is not a pleonasm, it means obligations for activities either in an occupational or in a family career. The first ends with retirement age, the second when children have left home. Both age limits can be ignored or postponed individually (Oswald & Franke 2014: 196-198), yet even then it remains a social – and ultimately biological – borderline which everybody willy-nilly passes. Thus, the end of active life cannot go by unnoticed;¹ it is a challenge and an opportunity to evaluate life so far. What determines that the challenge is accepted and the opportunity seized? By their very nature this question must be treated longitudinally, and will be in the following research report. Section 1 introduces the research design, Sections 2 and 3 present the results.

1 Research design

1.1 Review of concepts and research

The end of active life is a “status passage”. Seen in the dimensions of Glaser & Strauss (1971: 4-5, 14-17), it is not reversible, not repeatable, and not voluntary – in brief, ultimate. Specifically, the end of active life is neither an entry nor a transitory, but an exit passage (Nittel & Kilinc 2019). Exit passages are transitions between two life domains, in this case from the economy to the family and from two to one generation; the distinctive quality of the end of active life is that private life remains as the only arena of everyday life. As the ultimate exit passage, the end of active life has a high visibility and can motivate people to look back on their lives so far.

Furthermore, the end of occupational life is, given the legal regulation of retirement age for the employed population in Germany, highly standardized; most men and women in West Germany retire either at the age of 60 or 65 (Himmelreicher et al. 2009: 444-445). The end of active life is probably as much standardized as its start in schooling and more than its middle period by marriage, starting work and becoming adult (Walther 2014: 25-29). And standardization means the sharing of experiences among fellows at the same life step (Glaser & Strauss 1971: 117-127); it increases once more the visibility of the passage which encourages looking back on one’s life.

As most status passages, the end of active life, is a “critical life event” (Filip 1981: 24-25; Siegrist & Möller-Leimkühler 2020). It squeezes several processes together in a short time span, namely occupational and familial reorientation; and requires a new fit between person and environment, namely getting along with the end of work and the “empty nest”. Its “emotional non-indifference” – its importunity – requires some response among which the evaluation of one’s life suggests itself.

As most status passages, the end of active life is more or less publicly enacted or staged as some sort of initiation or “rite de passage” (van Genep 2005, Walther 2014: 22-25). Retirement is often marked by festivities in which colleagues, friends and the firm honour the retiree; and although children’s leaving home varies much more individually,² equivalent forms of

¹ In this respect, the exit from active life contrasts to the entry into adulthood. The latter is assessed by subjects and may vary strongly between them and even ignored by them, the former is legally regulated and socially marked. At age 30, only 30% of our sample see the entry into adulthood as “a peculiar threshold, a transition” and 53 feel as an adult without having noticed a transition (Meulemann 1995: 513-515).

² The last male child leaves home when fathers are between 56 and 59 years old, the last female child when mothers are between 52 and 57. As the time of leaving home increases with high school education, their age should be higher and less disperse in our sample (Mayer & Wagner 198: 29, 33).

honouring parents such as family meetings and birthday celebrations in their “empty nest” are often practiced.

As the ultimate exit and a highly standardized, ritually underpinned and importunate status passage, the end of active life, thus, cannot pass unnoticed. It is a challenge to look back. Yet there are obstacles against accepting and honestly accomplishing it. To overlook the active life as a whole is cognitively and emotionally demanding. One may sense instinctively that the review turns out to be unfavourable such that the expected gains may be smaller than the certain costs. Many events may have been forgotten, and some painful events may be excluded from memory. Self-protective tendencies (Fischer & Wiswede 2009: 408) may drive people to see their active lives in an unrealistically favourable light, to move a life balance away from losses and towards gains (Oswald & Franke 2014: 187-188), or to avoid self-evaluations altogether. And in an interview prompted by a stranger these tendencies may be even stronger than in real life. Over and above the general problems of interviewing elderly people such as misunderstanding and memory loss (Schlomann & Rietz 2019: 666-670), thus, the request for a life evaluation may meet specific hurdles.

Sociologists of biography frequently pointed out the challenge of evaluating one’s life. Theoretically, they did not tire to stress that transitions imply “identity work along the time line” (Walther & Stauber 2013: 27, Köttig 2013: 996), that they are “embedded in the total life history”, that they need to be researched from the “inner perspective of the person” (Köttig 2013: 991, 996), and that they are “biographical contexts of construction” (Truschkat 2013: 46, 49, 60). But they do not specify which transitions require which “identity work” and of what it consists; and they do not account of the cognitive and motivational obstacles against it, let alone report who performs it or not and why. In two voluminous handbooks on transitions (Schröer et al. 2013, Hof et al. 2014,) and in a review of the status passage literature (Nittel & Kilinc 2019) not a single form of “identity work” or coping is specified; and the end of active life is nowhere thematic as such or as a challenge to evaluate life. As for broader gerontological references in American (George & Ferraro 2016) and German handbooks (Krüger & Marotzki 2006, Hank et al. 2019), the same holds; reflection on and evaluation of one’s life is not treated or even mentioned among the key words.

In contrast to sociologists of biography, psychologists of well-being have treated the retrospective evaluation of life among older people also empirically. They designed survey question which require looking back on one’s life from old age such as “I’ve gotten much what I expected out of my life” to be agreed upon on a five-point-scale (Sirgy 2021: 583). Further off from our concern here, they designed questions on “attitudes on aging” (Sirgy 2021: 585) which have also been surveyed in the CHISP at age 66, and on the satisfaction with needs of old age, namely control, autonomy, self-realization and pleasure (Sirgy 2021: 587). Yet all of these concepts and measurements remain within the orbit of old age, none has been researched before the background of the accumulated life history.

Apart from the few and only partly pertinent examples above, an evaluation of active life at its end has never been surveyed in standardized interviews of larger samples, or even in informal interviews of small groups³. Reflections on one’s life seems to be a highly estimated research topic theoretically, but is almost totally neglected empirically. When there are no surveys of the

³ As for smaller samples of unstandardized surveys, we found only one such study of 16 elderly people in Turkey. It showed that “elderly people have different regrets about their lives” (Mersin et al. 2018: English summary).

evaluation of active life after its end, it is no wonder that there are no theories on its determinants as well. As a way out, we try to translate hypotheses and results from life satisfaction, which has been extensively researched (Sirgy 2021), to the realm of life evaluation.

In the following research, the subjective evaluation of active life at its end life is regarded on the background of the objective life history. Thus, the analysis rests on two sources: the occupational and family careers of the respondents which have been surveyed at age 30, 43, 56 and 66; and their evaluation at age 66. Putting subjective evaluation and objective life history together, it becomes feasible to do what sociologist never embarked upon and psychologist did not finalize: an analysis of life evaluation as determined by life history.

1.2 Hypotheses

Success and failure in occupational and private life

Active life is driven anthropologically by the wish to be effective and to attain chosen goals (Heckhausen & Heckhausen 2018: 2-3); and the wish to succeed is in contemporary industrialized societies some sort of axiom (Berger & Luckmann 1964, Bedford-Petersen et al. 2019: 84-88, Abele 2002: 112). Consequently, the evaluation of active life at its end should be first and foremost determined by the successes actually achieved. In active life one is expected to attain successes, at its end one *was* expected to attain successes. One has crossed the legal borderline of retirement age and is left in a “companionship”, if one still has a partner, and an “empty home”, if one has ever had children. Although one may still be employed and still raise children, the legal and biological caesurae serve as a challenge to wrap up one’s successes in occupational and in private life.

Successes are the attainment of institutionalized goals – defined for a class of people by a legitimate authority and beyond the control of an individual. Goals built upon each other and form a career in occupational and in private life. Together, both domains cover daily life almost completely (Meulemann 2021: 16-24). In occupational life, educational advances are granted according to rules of the school administration, occupational remuneration and promotion is granted according to the rules and the positional system of the firm. In private life, single persons strive for the civil status of marriage or partnership and parenthood which are defined by political and religious authorities. Thus, sequences of successes define careers in occupational and in private life. In prospect, that is, in planning one’s life, people strive for their attainment. In retrospect, that is, in evaluating one’s life, people sum up what they have attained as their “value”. In the eye of the person and as well as its social relations, successes are the matter to be “evaluated”.

Thus, the *success hypothesis* follows: The more successes one has attained in occupational and private life, the better one will evaluate one’s life altogether. But people experience also failures. Failures are successes aspired but not attained – examinations not passed, promotions missed, marriages broken. Insofar as failure is the non-attainment of success, the *failure hypothesis* follows: The more failures one has experienced in occupational and private life, the worse one will evaluate one’s life altogether.

Success or failure in occupational and private life

But success and failure are more than the flip sides of the same coin. In a life course perspective, they assume different significance. Success precedes failure in life planning. And their impact on life evaluation may differ accordingly.

Success is a motive and a fact. The motive aims at cumulating successes over a career, the fact is the achievement at a given time. As stated above, the success motive is some kind of cultural axiom in contemporary industrial societies. It determines the planning as well as the evaluation of life. To strive for success is considered normal – as well as the fact that some attain more successes than others.⁴ Failures, however disrupt a career. Although they happen to everybody, nobody takes them as normal. They require a re-orientation of life planning and life evaluation. Thus, the attained successes are mirrored in life evaluation before failure can darken the picture. The *success as guideline for careers hypothesis* predicts that the positive effects of successes are stronger than the negative effects of failures.

Yet although failures come after successes, they have a consequence which successes do not have. They need to be coped with. While successes must be acknowledged in all of their facets, failures must be reverted and at least some of their consequences minimized. Some intellectual and emotional labour is required to integrate them into a career where successes are strung together. With some probability, they survive as scars in one's self-concept however far one has and will again advance on the success ladder. Thus, failures, even if they interrupt a sequence of successes, may more strongly affect life evaluation. In parts. Some intellectual and emotional labour is required to integrate them into a career where successes are strung together. With some probability, they survive as scars in one's self-concept however far one has and will again advance on the success ladder. Thus, failures, even if they interrupt a sequence of successes, may more strongly affect life evaluation. The *failures as scars in careers hypothesis* predicts that the negative effects of failures are stronger than the positive effects of successes on life evaluation. Which of the two hypotheses is stronger, is difficult to justify in advance; it will be decided empirically.

The sequence of success and failure does not only lead only to contradicting hypotheses on their relative strength in determining life evaluation. It also alerts to the different forms in which they accumulate over time. If failure is regarded only as the opposite of success, it is equivalent to all successes above the current one. It becomes redundant to regard it separately from success. The different ways how success and failures accumulate are revealed by a look at the activities which produce success and failure in occupational and in private life.

In occupational life, the productive activity is working. Success is the last state of employment, prestige, and income – which builds upon former states. Having been a junior manager is no longer a success once one has been promoted to senior manager. Thus, to measure success, the *ultimate* state is pertinent only. On the other hand, failures are disruptions of the occupational career for various reasons from unemployment to disability which can happen repeatedly with divergent time spans. Thus, to measure a specific failure, the time spans of its occurrence must be *summed up*. The longer the total time of the disruption the greater the failure.

In private life, there are two productive activities: managing the household and handling intimate relationships. Household management is not driven by the success motive, and follows everyday exigencies rather than a sequence of institutionalized success goals, so that it need not be considered as a determinant of global life evaluation. However, the handling intimate relationships – providing recognition, comfort, and satisfaction to close partners – is relevant

⁴ The fact of inequality is so self-evident that it has never been surveyed. Yet its almost universal acknowledgement can be inferred from surveys about its legitimation. In 2018, for example, 86,2 % of the German population agree with the statement that "A society is fair when hard working people earn more than others" (Adriaans & Liebig 2021: 278).

here. It is channelled into status sequences at first personally aspired and ultimately legally confirmed. Success is the last state of partnership and parenthood. Having been partnered is no longer a success once one has been married. Again, to measure success, the *ultimate* state is pertinent only. On the other hand, failure is the lack or dissolution of partnership and the lack of children. Time spans of successes and failures, although measurable in this study, are meaningless. Intimate relations bear their value in themselves, the state rather than its duration counts. A partnership is gratifying or not for a host of reasons, but not for its age. A separation remains a scar in life no matter how long it has blocked a new engagement.⁵ Thus, the cases of disruptions of intimate relations over the life course, of separations and divorces, are *summed up*.⁶ The more separations and divorces the greater the failure.

Whether in occupational or private life, success is the ultimate attainment, but failures are summed up over cases – weighted or not by their time spans.⁷ Former successes are incorporated in the last one, failures remain distinct and add up over the life course.

Starting conditions and educational certification in occupational, but not in private life

One needs a diploma to become a teacher, but everybody is free to marry. In contrast to successes in private life, successes in occupational life depend on two *starting conditions*: Factually, support of one's social origin at age 16 and one's intellectual endowment as measured at age 16 facilitate educational and occupational success. Normatively, good grades at high school at age 16 and educational certifications from high school to university gained until age 30 (Abele 2002: 115) are required for success. These four starting conditions – *parental status* and *intelligence* as well as *grades* and *certificates* – pave the way to occupational success and to a positive occupational life evaluation. They are the most often researched and strongest determinants of educational stratification (Esser 2021). Yet parental status, intelligence and grades determine the highest educational certificate up to age 30 which is the gate to occupational success later on. Therefore, it will be examined empirically in how far the three former ones have strong effects on the latter one and if they correlate with the ultimate variable, the occupational life evaluation at age 66. As will be shown in the variables section, the effects are strong and the correlations nil such that hypotheses on effects of educational certification up to 30 on occupational life evaluation at age 66 need to be proposed.

The impact of educational certification up to age 30 on occupational life evaluation at age 66, however, is ambivalent. On the one hand, it can be considered as an endeavor of the person. Then, it is an asset and may determine the occupational life evaluation, just as any later occupational success, positively. On the other hand, it is a yardstick to evaluate later occupational success. Then, it is an obligation and may determine the occupational life evaluation negatively. As subjects can more easily sweep educational certification in the large bowl of lifetime occupational success than to relativize what they have gained in active

⁵ For example, someone who spends a year with three marriages seamlessly following each other would have the same value for failure, namely 0, as someone who spends the year with one partner. The trauma of separation would be completely over-shadowed by the new engagements. Obviously, there is less success and more failure in the first than in the second case.

⁶ If people evaluate the whole occupational or private life career, the fact of a failure is probably more relevant to them than its attribution to the actor or his environment. Therefore, failures in occupational and private life are regarded as facts independent of the responsibility of the subject - for example, whether someone has been laid off or left his firm voluntarily; or whether he left an intimate partner or was left. Failures in private life, however, are primarily attributed to the actors.

⁷ A linguistic indicator for this difference is that in a specific career success is designated in the singular, yet failures in the plural.

occupational life against what one they have been endowed with at its entry, the first interpretation seems more plausible. Thus, the *achievement hypothesis of occupational life* is chosen: Educational certification up to age 30 increases the evaluation of occupational life at age 66.

1.3 Data, Variables, and Analysis strategy

Sample and panel waves

Active life covers several decades. Looking back and evaluating such a long stretch of time bears the risk of distortion. What has been kept in mind, may have lost validity the further one looks back. The only remedy against shrinking validity is provided by one's own statements documented in former times. They are objective insofar as they can no longer be changed by the subjects. But a scientific survey which repeatedly has asked the same persons the same questions early and later on is a repository what really was the case. It functions as an objective observer.

The CHISP (Cologne High School Panel) is a cohort study which serves this function. It starts off with a survey of High School Students at age 16 in 1969, and reinterviews them at the ages of 30, 43, 56, and 66.⁸ As it is educationally privileged, the end of occupational, and thus also active life is somewhat higher than in the general population (Himmelreicher et al. 2009: 443). The dependent variables, the occupational and private life evaluation, were surveyed at age 66; the independent variables were gathered for the periods between the surveys: starting conditions of the occupational career at age 16, the occupational and private career up to age 30, from 30 to 43, 43 to 56, and 56 to 66. In the following, subjects of analysis are the 1013 respondents who remained in the sample up to age 66 (Birkelbach & Meulemann 2023a).

Dependent variable

Dependent variables are the evaluation of the occupational and the private life at age 66. They have been surveyed by the following two questions:

Looking over your occupational life in total, what would you say: The balance is (1) negative, (2) rather negative, (3) balanced (4) rather positive, or (5) positive. – And looking over your private life in total (continued as before).

More than 55 % of the respondents draw a “positive” balance (5) of their occupational and of their private life, and 33,8 % do so simultaneously in both domains; both correlate $r=.310$. Therefore, option (1) to (4) were contrasted against option (5) as a dichotomy to be analyzed by logistic regressions.

Independent variables are the successes and the failures in the occupational and the private career. As successes cumulate over the life career and thus correlate strongly (Birkelbach & Meulemann, 2023b: chapter 7), only the latest ones, reported at age 66, are considered. As failures interrupt the career, their durations are added over the periods up to 30, 30 to 43, 43 to 46 56 and 56 to 66 to a single measure. Because only the occupational life evaluation may depend on starting conditions, the respective variables are introduced and examined separately.

Independent variables: Success and failure in occupational life

Successes in occupational life are defined by income and prestige, operationalized as the latest occupational prestige and the latest hourly income reported at age 66: HINCOME66 with a mean of 103,27 € and a standard deviation of 34, 6 € and MPS66 with a mean of 103,27 and a

⁸ We are grateful to the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft which finance the four replications.

standard deviation of 34,6 (Birkelbach & Meulemann 2023b: chapter 2, section 1.5). HINCOME66 and MPS66 correlate $r=.205$ ($p<.001$). The positive effect income – but not of occupational prestige – on life satisfaction has been shown often (Sirgy 2021: 112 - 115) and can be plausibly assumed for a positive life evaluation as well.

Failures in occupational life are defined as disruption of the occupational career in four forms: unemployment, family periods, waiting, and disability. These forms are heterogeneous in several respects. While unemployment, family periods, and waiting are enforced onto or chosen by the person, disability is caused by a third party, namely nature⁹ And while unemployment belongs socially and personally to a single life sphere, the economy, family periods and waiting reflect the resolution of a conflict between the economy and private life. Finally, while family periods are gender-typed insofar as they are often expected from women and considered as inappropriate for men, the remaining forms are gender-neutral.

The forms were surveyed in the so-called Global Biography. It was the first question in the surveys at each age and required respondents to recall their life from the last to the current survey in episodes with starting and ending time in months. Over all surveys from age 16 to 66, respondents reported up to 45 episodes. Response options were preformulated in five major groups such as study (20)¹⁰ or employment (50) and some minor codes. Of the latter, “registered as unemployed” (67) was categorized as UNEMPLOYED; “discontinuing education or employment because of marriage or home keeping obligation” (61), and “...because of motherhood” (62) were categorized as FAMILY; “waiting for study or trainee place” (65), “searching for a trainee or job position” (66), “waiting for military or civilian service” (73), and “waiting for a dissertation” (78) was categorized as WAITING; and “discontinuing education or employment because of other reasons” (63), “illness” (68), and “invalidity pensioner” (81) were coded as DISABILITY. The negative effect unemployment and on life satisfaction has been shown often (Sirgy 2021: 90-92) and can be plausibly for a positive life evaluation as well. The same hold for family times (Sirgy 2021: xxx), but not for waiting and disability.

The cases of these summary codes and their time spans added from age 16 to 66 are presented in table 1. As the number of cases – of episodes in the global biography – was skewed to lower values, only the percentages of all episodes (1+) and of higher order episodes (2+) are reported. The means and standard deviations among the affected and all 1013 subjects indicate the gravity of the failure for individuals and for the sample.

Table 1 Number of cases and times between 16 and 66 for failure in the occupational career: Affected and all subjects at age 66

	# of cases in %		Time from 16 to 66 in months			
	1+	2+	Affected		All 1013	
			M	SD	M	SD
UNEMPLOYED-66	33.8	(-9) 12.6	22.6	38.1	7.6	24.6
FAMILY-66	28.2	(-5) 8.8	140.2	149.6	39.5	100.2
WAITING-66	14.7	(-7) 3.8	7.1	6.1	1.0	3.4
DISABILITY-66	20.2	(-4) 2.6	63-.7	77.8	12.9	43.3

⁹ While disability has natural origins, unemployment, family periods, and waiting are socially and personally determined. Therefore, the latter can also be classified according to internal and external causal attribution and motive. They may be seen as socially enforced or personally chosen; and the motives may range from resignation to a positive aspiration.

¹⁰ Numbers in brackets refer to the code number in the code plan.

Column “2+”: number in brackets with minus sign is the highest number of cases

As for *unemployment*, 33.8 % were affected at least once between age 16 and 66; of them 21.1 % for 1 period and 12.6 % for 2 up to 9 periods; the distribution is skewed to lower values. *Among the affected subjects*, the average time was 22.6 months – nearly two years – with a standard deviation of 38.1 months; together, both figures demonstrate again, that the cases are skewed to the lower values. As a view on the distributions of the time spans not presented here shows, the unemployment is longer than 36 months of the 50 years surveyed for only 17.3 %. As an individual event, unemployment is not rare, but also not a too costly sacrifice in terms of occupational opportunities. *Among all subjects*, the mean time is 7.6 months with a standard deviation on 24.6 months. As a group fate, unemployment is even less harmful. Only 5.0 % of the total group experience unemployment for 36 months and more – certainly also because of its high educational level.

As for *family periods*, 28.2 % were affected at least once between age 16 and 66, 8.8 % for 2 up to 5 periods. *Among the affected subjects*, the average time was 140.2 months – nearly 12 years – with a standard deviation of 149.6 months; 64.6 % had a time over 36 months. As an individual event, family periods are not rare and very extended, that is, harmful for occupational opportunities. *Among all subjects*, the mean time is 39.6 months with a standard deviation of 100.2 months. As a group career path, family periods are less enduring and varied than individually, but still very long and differentiated. Rather than a failure in the occupational career, it often seems to be a success in, if not a resort to, private life. 4,8 % of all subjects report values above 360 – three and more of the 50 years surveyed, that is, probably the whole life after education and a first occupational period. The highest value is 528 months – 45 years or the whole life after finishing education.

As for *waiting times*, 14.7 % were affected at least once between age 16 and 66, of them 3.8 % from 2 up to 7 periods. *Among the affected subjects*, the mean time is 7.1 months with a standard deviation of 6.1 months. *Among all subjects*, the mean time is 1.0 months with a standard deviation on 3.4 months. Individually and on the group level, waiting times are rare and not harmful.

As for *disability*, 20.2 % were affected at least once between age 16 and 66, of them 2.6 % from 2 up to 4 periods. *Among the affected subjects*, the average time was 63.7 with a standard deviation of 77.8 months. 55.9 % experience disability for more than three years. As an individual event, disability is not rare and fairly harmful. *Among all subjects*, the mean time is 12.9 months with a standard deviation of 24.6 months. 9.2 % of the total group experience disability for more than 36 months. As a group fate, disability is less harmful than on the individual level.

If one compares the number of cases between the failures, unemployment is the most frequent, followed by family periods, disability, and waiting. Occupational life is more often interrupted by its immanent than by external risks. Moreover, if one compares the mean times of the affected and of all subjects between the remaining three failures, a rank order of gravity is revealed. The most absorbing are family periods, followed by disability and waiting. Yet all of them are rare events insofar as they are experienced by only a part of the population – at most a third. They hit only some, in contrast to successes which everybody attains to a smaller or larger degree. Moreover, the forms of failure are heterogeneous; none of the twelve correlations of their time spans is significant.

Independent variables: Success and failure in private life

Successes in private life comprise partnership and parenthood. Both were surveyed in the so-called partner biography in which respondents were requested to tell the beginning and the end time and the form of the end for each partnership.

Partnership varies according to commitments from consensual union to marriage. In prior research, marriage strongly increases general life satisfaction (Sirgy 2021: 138). Yet consensual unions have only been compared to married, yet to unmarried persons: Married are more satisfied with life than cohabiting persons in some, but equally satisfied in other studies (Sirgy 2021: 140). In this study, single was coded in as 0 none, 1 partner and not married, and 2 married, that is, as increasing partnership obligation. At age 66, 16.3 % were single, 11.2% partnered, and 72.3 % married; in the analyses, two dummy variables, PARTNER66 and MARRIAGE66, with single as basis were used.

Parenthood varies with the number of children which indicates an increasing commitment. In prior research, parenthood as such had no clear-cut effect on life satisfaction (Sirgy 2021: 139), and this may hold also for the number of children. In this study, it is coded as the number of children at age 66; 21.3 % had no, 16.8 % one, 33.7 % two and 28.1 % three and more children; in the analysis, two dummy variables, CHILDN66:1, CHILDN66:2, CHILDN:3+, with no children as base were used. Partnership and parenthood correlate strongly between the ages described such that their values at earlier ages need not be included among the independent variables (Birkelbach & Meulemann 2023: chapter 2, section 1.5).

Failures in private life are defined by the number of separations and divorces, also recorded in the partner biography. In prior research, the effect of both on life satisfaction has not been regarded (Sirgy 2021: 139), such that no transfer to life evaluation is possible. In this study, respondents at age 66 reported over all four panel waves up to 9 partnerships. No partnership was reported by 1.7 %, one by 54.1 %, two partnerships by 27.4 %, and three and more by 16,8%.

In order to identify separations and divorces among the partnerships, the total percentage of one or more partnerships has been split up into separations and divorces according to whether the end time of the last partnership was the interview time or not, that is, whether they still existed or not; and according to the form of termination of the former partnership mentioned by the respondents. Of the latter, only separation and divorce, but not the death of a partner can be evaluated as a failure. For example, the 54.1 % with one partnership were split up into 47.4 % who reported no end date of the partnership and 6.7 % who did. Among the latter, the mentioning of an end date indicates a separation of a partnership or the divorce of a marriage, and was classified as failure; but the mentioning of death of the partner did not, and was ignored. In the same way, the percentage for two and more partnerships can be split up into separation and divorce. The number of separations results from subtracting the number of divorces and partner's death from the partnership endings. Thus computed, 69.1 % experience no separation, 18.7 % one, 7.3 % two and 4.9 % three and more – up to eight – separations, in the analyses, two dummy variables SEPARATION-66:1 and SEPARATION-66:2+ with none as basis are used. And 74.1 % experience no divorce, 22.8 % one, and 3.1 % two or three divorces; in the analysis, a dummy variable DIVORCE-66 for one or more with none as basis used.

Failures of private life refer to partnership alone and capture their abandoning. Entering and abandoning a partnership assume a “light” and a “strong” form, defined personally or legally and obliging less or more: PARTNER and MARRIAGE, SEPARATION and DIVORCE.

Independent variables: Starting conditions in occupational life

Parental status when the respondent was 16, prestige was measured at age 16 by Treiman's (1977) prestige scale, FATHPREST; intelligence as the mean of two verbal and two non-verbal subtests of Amthauer's Intelligence-Structure-Test, IST (Meulemann 1979: 195). Grades were as the mean of the four main high school subjects which were z-transformed in each of the 72 10th classes of the High Schools 1969/70 with a mean of 5, AVGRADE (Meulemann 1979: 193) such that the direction was reverted and higher values represent higher grades. Grades were available for 997 of the 1013 subjects. Over all classes, their mean was 4.92 and their standard deviation 7.05; they ranged from 2.28 to 6.96. Educational certificates up to age 30 CERTIFICATES-30 fall into five classes: (1) no high school graduation (Abitur), 15.0 %; (2) high school graduation, but not more, 7.7; (3) study without graduation, 8.6 %, (4) study with graduation, 61.0 %; (5) study with a dissertation, 2.9 %.

In a linear regression of CERTIFICATES-30, z-transformed under the standard normal distribution, 12 % of its variance is explained by FATHPREST (beta=.189), IST (beta=.125) and AVGRADE (beta=.214). Thus, a conceivable impact of the starting conditions at age 16 on occupational life evaluation at age 66 is taken over by the educational certification up to age 30. Furthermore, neither father's occupational prestige, nor intelligence, nor average grades correlate even minimally with occupational life evaluation, but educational certification does so: $r=.06$, $p>.056$. For both reasons, thus, the occupational career need not be traced back beyond educational certificates at age 30.

Finally, gender is controlled for by a dichotomy with value 1 for the 531 MALEs and 0 for the 482 females.¹¹

Analysis strategy

The predictor variables and hypotheses for both dependent variables are listed in table 2. For both, three predictor groupings are used: success and failure in order to test the respective hypotheses; success only and failure only in order to decide between the success as guideline and the failure as scar hypothesis. To test the achievement hypothesis, one additional predictor grouping is introduced for the evaluation of occupational life. In every regression, gender is introduced as control variable.

To compare the models, the absolute sizes of the logistic regression coefficients are not relevant because the hypotheses refer only to the predictor group. Yet the model can be compared according to the direction and rank order and in total according the BIC-value which measures the impact of all predictors and is comparable to the R²-value corrected for degree of freedom in a metric regression.¹²

¹¹ In the only comparable longitudinal study we know, gender had no effect on the subjective evaluation of success among university graduates one and a half year later (Abele-Brehm & Spurk (2014: 13-14).

¹² The regression analyses were computed with SPSS-GENLIN.

Table 2 Predictors of the evaluation of occupational and private life: hypotheses and variables

		Occupational	Private
Educational Achievement	+	CERTIFICATES-30	
Success at age 66	+	HINCOME66	PARTOBL66
	+	MPS66	CHILDN66
Failure from 16 to 66	-	UNEMPLOYED-66, months	DIVORCE-66, #
	-	FAMILY-66, months	SEPARATION-66, #
	-	DISABILITY-66, months	
	-	WAITING-66, months	
Control	?	MALE	MALE

Variable names followed by age without a hyphen refer to the time point, and with a hyphen to the time span from age 16 onwards

2 Results: Evaluation of occupational life

Analyses of the total group

The logistic regressions of occupational life evaluation are presented in table 3. Four models are computed: for successes with and without educational certification, for failures, and for successes and failures.

Table 3 Logistic regression of occupational life evaluation on achievement, success and failure and on gender

H	Model							
	Success with Achievement		Success		Failure		Success & Failure	
	b	SE(b)	b	SE(b)	b	SE(b)	b	SE(b)
Intercept	-.811***	.250	-.900***	.221	-.441***	.120	-.412	.249
Achievement - 30 CERTIFICATE-30	+	.075	.102					
Success at age 66 HINCOME66	+	.011	.006	.012*	.006		.008	.005
MPS66	+	.007**	.002	.007***	.002		.007**	.002
Failure 16-66 UNEMPLOYED-66	-				-.013***	.004	-.012***	.004
FAMILY-66	-				-.003***	.001	-.002**	.001
WAITING-66	-				-.027	.019	-.021	.022
DISABILITY-66	-				-.005***	.002	-.005**	.002
Control: MALE	?	.310*	.136	.318*	.135	.159	.113	.147
Valid n		949		949		1008		949
Predictors		4		3		5		7
-Log likelihood		631.023		631.307		391.266		618.454
BIC		1296.324		1290.035		824.027		1291.771

H Hypothesis. *p<.05, **p<.01, *** p<.001. Reference: MALE female

The model for success with achievement shows no significant effects of educational certification and of hourly income ($p<.051$) and significant positive effects of occupational prestige and for men. The *achievement hypothesis* is not confirmed. The model for success only shows significant effects of hourly income and prestige. It confirms the *success hypothesis*. Furthermore, it shows a significantly positive effect for men. It is according to the BIC almost as good as the model for success and achievement. Therefore, the following models shall no longer include achievement.

The model for failure shows significant effects for unemployment, family periods, and disability. Waiting has also a negative, even the biggest effect, but its effect is not significant; it is the rarest and most left skewed of the four failure (see table 1) and has the largest standard error of estimate. All in all, the *failure hypothesis* is confirmed. Furthermore, the failure model decreases the male advantage below significance. Its BIC is smaller than the BIC of the success only model. Thus, successes more strongly contribute positively to occupational life evaluation than failures negatively. The *success as guideline hypothesis* is supported, the *failure as scars hypothesis* is disconfirmed.

The model for success and failure repeats the results of the two separate models; it is according to the BIC only slightly more powerful than the success model. If prediction is the only goal of analysis, the success variables suffice: Income, prestige and male gender determine the occupational life evaluation. However, the disappearance of the gender difference in the failure as well as the success and failure model suggest gender typical processes of occupational life evaluation which shall be explored in gender specific analyses.

Gender specific analyses

The only gender-typed failure, family periods, had a significantly negative effect on occupational life evaluation in the total group. In gender groups, gender-typing should produce differences of distributions and of effects. Family periods should be more frequent among women than men. And, assuming that they are less of a sacrifice and more of a gain for women, their negative effects should be absolutely smaller for women than for men. In comparison with other failures, furthermore, the gender differences of distributions and effects should be bigger for family periods than for the remaining three failures. To examine this, the distribution of failures between men and women will be regarded and their effects on occupational life evaluation explored in regressions for both genders.

In table 4, the total time of failures in the occupational career from 16 to 66 in months which were presented for the whole group in the last two columns of table 2 is split up for men and women; the results of the analyses of variance are added in the last two columns.

Table 4 Total times of failures in the occupational career from 16 and 66 in months: All 531 men and 482 women at age 66

	Men		Women		Analysis of variance		
	M	SD	M	SD	F(1,1012)	p<	Eta
UNEMPLOYED-66	5.9	18.7	9.6	29.6	5.85	.016	.076
FAMILY-66	3.6	29.6	76.9	131.7	155.76	.001	.365
WAITING-66	0.9	3.4	1.2	3.5	1.48	.224	.038
DISABILITY-66	9.1	30.7	17.0	53.6	8.48	.004	.091

Women experience all failures except waiting times for a significantly longer mean time than men – as marked in the bold types. As expected, the difference is by far biggest in the gender-typed failure of family periods: 73.3 months, more than six of the 50 years surveyed. For disability, it amounts to 7.9 months, for unemployment to 3.7 months, in both cases far less than a year. The association measure Eta follows the same order. In brief, women leave occupational careers much more often for the family than men, but they are also – although to a smaller degree – more strongly afflicted than men by disability and unemployment.

If women experience failures more often than men, is also their occupational life evaluation more strongly negatively affected by failures than men? And does this hold in particular for

those failures women experience more often than men, namely family periods and disability? Even more specifically, does it hold for the only failure which is gender-typified, namely family periods? Is this more disadvantageous for women because it destroys aspirations? Or is it less disadvantageous for women because it offers an escape from occupational challenges? More formally put, is there an interaction effect of gender and family periods on occupational life evaluation? In table 5, the hypotheses about gender-typed effects of success and failure on the occupational life evaluation are summarized, and the respective gender-specific regressions presented together with the regression in the total group from table 4.

Table 5 Logistic regression of occupational life evaluation on success and failure for men and women

	Hypotheses			Total group (T)		Men (M)		Women (W)	
	T	M	W	b	SE(b)	b	SE(b)	b	SE(b)
Intercept				-.412	.2486	.002	.3005	-1.024	.3911
Success at age 66									
HINCOME66	+	+	+	.008	.0022	.004	.0049	.021	.0108
MPS66	+	+	+	.007**	.0038	.004	.0027	.011**	.0036
Failure 16-30									
UNEMPLOYED-66	-	-	-	-.012***	.0038	-.012*	.0057	-.012*	.0052
FAMILY-66	-	--	-	-.002**	.0008	-.002	.0038	-.002*	.0008
WAITING-66	-	-	-	-.021	.0220	-.033	.0361	-.013	.0279
DISABILITY-66	-	-	-	-.005**	.0017	-.001	.0030	-.007**	.0025
Control: MALE	?			.113	.1471				
Valid n				949		492		457	
Predictors				7		6		6	
-Log likelihood				618.46		291.583		322.524	
BIC				1291.77		626.040		688.437	

*p<.05, **p<.01, *** p<.001.

As for successes, income as well as prestige have much smaller effects among men than among women. And the effects are not significant among men, but among women; for women, HINCOME66 of .021 just misses the 5 % level of significance ($p<.057$) and MPS has the expected positive effect.

As for failures, unemployment and family periods have the same effects for both genders. Both are equally detrimental for the occupational life evaluation of men and women. More formally, there is no interaction effect between gender and the only gender-typed failure, family periods. As the mean time of the latter is much lower for men, the standard error is bigger and the coefficient misses significance. Disability, however, has a much smaller effect for men than for women which is significant only for women. This may be partly result from the diversity of the codes subsumed under “disability”. If the “other reasons” are relatively frequent relative to “illness” and “invalidity pensioner” and often refer to caring for others and if, furthermore, they apply more often for women than men, disability would comprise also a gender-specific social consequence of natural conditions. Finally, waiting does not have a significant effect for both genders.

According to the BIC-values, the occupational life evaluation is considerably less well explained for both genders than for the total group, and only slightly less well for men than for women. Ignoring gender in predicting occupational life evaluation means ignoring quite a bit of impacts not considered here – such as gender specific starting conditions, aspirations and life plans. Yet in sum, the impacts considered here do not operate differentially between genders.

Looking at the single predictors, however, it seems that women orient their occupational life evaluation more strongly on success than men. The bigger effects of HINCOME66 and MPS66 probably indirectly reflect an unexpected gender-typing. Women feel less obliged to pursue an occupational career than men such that occupational success gains much more weight in their occupational life evaluation; success is an option more than an obligation, and consequently an achievement rather than a matter of course. Ironically, gender-typing show its impact in advantageous rather than disadvantageous results.

Yet women do not evaluate their lives more strongly according to failures than men. This holds above all for family periods which have the same effect for both genders. For women, as it seems, abandoning work in favor of the family does neither destroy aspirations nor provide an escape from challenges; in neither sense, family periods are connotated gender-specifically. Regarding the two remaining not gender-typified failures, this holds also for unemployment. Although unemployment may be triggered off by gender differences between labour markets, this seems to be forgotten in retrospect – particularly in an educationally privileged group which is geared to upper positions in the public service. Women experience unemployment as painful as men and discount the occupational life evaluation as strongly. Finally, disability may in part be less gender-neutral as supposed. If career disruptions in order to take care of others are indeed frequent and more so for women than for men, some of its strong effect for women can be explained.

3 Results: Evaluation of private life

The logistic regressions of private life evaluation on success and failure and on gender are presented in table 6. As in the regressions of occupational life evaluation, three models are computed: for successes, for failures, and for successes and failures.

Table 6 Logistic regression of private life evaluation on success and failure and on gender

	H	Model					
		Success		Failure		Success & Failure	
		B	SE(B)	B	SE(B)	B	SE(B)
Intercept	-	.202	.475	.110	-.983	.234	
		1.054***					
Success at age 66							
Private Obligation: PARTNER	+	.464	.260		.499	.2638	
: MARRIAGE	+	1.307***	.195		1.191***	.208	
CHILD66: 1	+	.356	.217		.540*	.223	
: 2	+	.408*	.188		.560**	.195	
: 3+	+	.461*	.195		.663***	.204	
Failure from 16 to 66							
SEPARATION-66:1	-		.005	.170	.273	.181	
:2+	-		-.508***	.200	.228	.234	
DIVORCE-66, yes	-		-.872***	.149	-.722***	.161	
Control: MALE	?	-.010	.135	.143	.113	-.044	
Valid n		1006		1010		1006	
Predictors		6		4		9	
-Log likelihood		53.956		31.878		161.926	
BIC		156.309		98.345		392.989	

H Hypothesis. *p<.05, **p<.01, *** p<.001.

In the success model, all variables have the predicted positive effect. As for the private obligations, only marriage has a significant effect. Partnership is often seen as a test for marriage; as long as the test runs, it cannot contribute more to a positive evaluation of private life than its ultimate positive result. As for the child number, the biggest gap is between no children and one child; the gap increases with two or more children and becomes significant. The more strongly binding private relations are, the more they contribute to a positive evaluation of private life. Taking account of the instrumental quality of partnership, the *success hypothesis* is confirmed.

In the failure model, one separation has no effect, two or more separations and divorce have the predicted negative effects. Obviously, just as a partnership is accepted as a means to find the ultimately right partner, a single separation is accepted as the almost unavoidable cost of the search. A single separation has become as normal as none. Thus, both are not detrimental to the evaluation of private life. Taking account of the instrumental quality of a single separation, the *failure hypothesis* is confirmed.

In the success and failure model, the success variables keep their positive effect, and gain – apart from marriage – in size and in significance. Of the failure variables, however, only divorce keeps its strong and significant negative effect while the effect of separations becomes positive, although not significant. Regarding success and failure simultaneously, partnership and separation do not affect private life evaluation, while marriage and divorce do. “Light” family transitions do not matter for private life evaluation, “strong” ones do. Merely consensual forms are practiced, but only seriously binding and definitely dissolving ones have consequences. One can postpone commitments for some time of one’s life, but one needs commitments in order to arrive at a positive evaluation of one’s life in retrospect.

In none of the three models, gender has a significant effect. Private life proceeds on scales of obligations common to both genders. Its evaluation is conditioned by the obligations waged and preserved rather than by gender.

The comparison of the BIC values shows that success does more strongly contribute to private life evaluation than failure – alone and together with failure. The *success as guideline hypothesis* is supported, the *failure as scar hypothesis* disconfirmed. The career rather than the deviation from it is decisive for the private life evaluation.

The effect of SEPARATION-66:1 becomes zero and the effect of SEPARATIOM-66:2+ even switches the sign when successes are introduced as additional predictors. Why? It looks as if partnership, marriage and parenthood function as suppressor variables of the negative effect of separation on private life evaluation. In order to become a suppressor, a third variables must have correlations of opposite signs with the two examined variables, in our case, separation and private life evaluation. Specifically, the following seems plausible: Partnership correlates positively with separation and negatively with private life evaluation; and marriage and parenthood negatively with separation and positively with private life evaluation. If these third variables – partnership, marriage and parenthood – are not controlled for – as in the success model – separations engender a negative evaluation; if they are controlled for – as in the success and failure model – the negative effect of separation on evaluation is attenuated and even turned in a positive one.

Indeed, partnership (as a dichotomy) correlates positively $\rho = .237$ with separations (as a single variable with values from 0 to 2) and negatively $\rho = .104$ with the evaluation of one's life as "positive" against all lesser options. And marriage (as a dichotomy) and child number (as a single variable with values from 0 to 3) correlate negatively $\rho = -.352$ and $-.240$ with separations; and positively $\rho = .264$ and $.126$ with the evaluation of one's life as "positive". Thus, partnership, marriage, and children – successes in private life – serve as suppressor for the negative effect of separations on evaluation in the failure model and have truly no or a positive effect as in the success and failure model. Partnership under the proviso of open end does not pave the way into marriage and parenthood but rather postpones or by-passes them. As the German adage puts it ironically: "Many engagements lead to marriage". Stripped of irony, the adage points out: "Moving in with a partner is not the declaration, but the virtualization of the intention to marry."

If one overlooks the multivariate results for the private life evaluation, the success and the failure hypothesis are confirmed. Furthermore, the simultaneous examination of success and failure reveals that the "light" successes and failure do not count for the private life evaluation at the end of the active life; only the "strong" ones do. Finally, the success as guideline hypothesis is, the failure as scar hypothesis is not confirmed. Successes determine the private life evaluations more strongly than failures. The results are as simple as that: To be able to evaluate one's private life at age 66 positively, it is best to have married and got children, and to have avoided a divorce. Although the obligatory family career of marriage and parenthood has given way to a plethora of private life models in practice, it still affects the evaluation of the practice.

The positive effect of parenthood on private life *evaluation* at age 66 in table 6 contrasts to its negative effects on private life *satisfaction* at age 30, 43, 56 and 66 (Birkelbach & Meulemann 2023: chapter 2, figure 3). Possibly, this is due to the difference between the concepts and the time points of their surveys.

On the one hand, the evaluation of private life at age 66 asks for a retrospective balance of the active life between positive and negative aspects, which respondents, in order to maintain self-respect, are inclined to draw predominantly in favor of the positive side. In retrospect on active life time, the financial and emotional costs of children move into the background of memory, yet their indispensability as a part of a normal life remains prominent. In West German population surveys on eight immanent and instrumental values of children from 1979 to 2005, the immanent value “Without children, there is lacking something central to life” was constantly the most important (Meulemann 2007: 37-38). Children belong to the active normal life to be looked back upon such that they foster its positive evaluation.

On the other hand, life satisfaction at age 30, 43, 56 and 66 is sensitive to the financial and emotional costs of children when they are present. Then, children are a matter of experience and contribute positively and negatively to the satisfaction with the current life phase; and they may have, depending on the circumstances, in sum even have a negative impact. In brief, the evaluation of active life in retrospect is fed more by concepts of a normal life, the satisfaction with life phases more by its current pertinent experiences.

4 Conclusion

Comparing the impact of success and failure between occupational and private life

In occupational as well as in private life, the success hypothesis and the failure hypothesis are confirmed, and the success as guideline hypothesis beats the failure as scar hypothesis. Although the criteria of success and failure are different in the two life domains, their effects on life evaluation are the same. In both, life evaluation reflects success more strongly than failure. Success is the guideline to evaluate life, but failures can interfere. Yet although success and failure determine life evaluation equally in both domains, a closer look reveals differences of their total and specific effects, as measured by the BIC and the regression coefficients, between the two domains.

As for total effects, occupational life evaluation rests on success alone, private life evaluation on success and failure. As table 3 shows for occupational life evaluation, successes have a stronger impact than failures and still a slightly stronger impact than successes and failures together. The evaluation of the occupational life rests on the income and prestige gained; and unemployment, family, disability and waiting have no additional impact; failures add only a minimal explanatory power. Occupational life is seen as a career of successes which overrides failures; the former compensate for the latter on the same scale. As table 6 shows for private life evaluation, successes have again a stronger impact than failures, yet a considerably weaker effect than successes and failure together; failures add a remarkable explanatory power. Private life is seen as a resultant of successes and failures; both are of a different kind. In brief, failures do not affect the evaluation of occupational life, but of private life. For example, unemployment is no longer a scar in occupational life once a good job has been re-attained, but divorce remains a scar on private life even when a new marriage has been started.

As for specific effects, success and failure assume different qualities in occupational and private life. In occupational life, success is attained according to certified achievements; failures are disruptions of the career, measured by their accumulated time span. In private life, successes are chosen according to personal taste; failures are revisions of choices measured by their number of cases; and both follow a scale of formality or obligation. Most of the results differ between both domains accordingly.

In occupational life, achievements determined the life evaluation positively, and three of the four career interruptions negatively – unemployment, family periods, and disability; the insignificant negative effect of waiting will be ignored in the following. Of the three failures with a significant negative effect, the one of employment was stronger than the ones of family periods and disability. Reasons for this may be sought in two differences between the failures, their causation by external or internal forces and the gravity of their consequence. Unemployment is largely dictated by external, economic forces and undermines the status of the family and the self-image of the person; family periods are chosen by the persons and may even serve their intentions; disability is dictated by nature and difficult to be attributed to personal will.

However, the expected gender-typing of failures – family periods vs. the rest – was not found when the analysis was split up. Unemployment and family periods attenuated a positive occupational life evaluation in the two gender groups just as in the total group. Although family periods are much more common among women, they do not differentially affect life evaluation. Furthermore, disability attenuated a positive occupational life evaluation unexpectedly among women. Ironically, effects are not gender specific where expected, and gender specific where not expected.

In private life, formal and informal choices of partnership and their revisions and the number of children determine the life evaluation. Choices and revisions affect private life evaluations when they are legally binding, but not when they are merely consensual. Although private life has become much more varied, its evaluation still depends on the formal certification of the choices. The number of children increases the private life evaluation – but the fact of having a child at all is more powerful than an increase of the number of children.

In sum, occupational and private life evaluation are equally driven by their specific success criteria. But the dependence of the life evaluation in the two domains on their specific failures differs. As for occupational life, it is not easily brought above a common denominator. As for private life, it results from the formal quality of the failure which corresponds to the commitments required for the successes.

Ambivalence of failures in occupational life

Successes in occupational life are attainments certified in grades, prestige and income, successes and failures in private life are enacted by legal procedures. All these are beyond the will of the person and insofar objective. But failures in occupational life are interpreted and insofar subjective. They are, in principle, ambivalent and may be seen as positive or negative according to the world-view of the person. Unemployment may be seen as a challenge rather than a mischief, family periods as an enrichment rather than a sacrifice, waiting times as a gain of freedom rather than a fate, disability as a nudge for life revisions rather than a restriction. Among people choosing the former rather than the latter, negative effects on occupational life evaluation may shrink or even become positive. In a path analytic frame, an optimistic interpretation of the interruption can be depicted as a positive arrow on the negative arrow from failure to evaluation.

As the interpretation of the occupational failures was not surveyed, its effects could not have been examined. They had to be defined objectively as disruptions of a career, and hypotheses about their effects had to be justified by arguing in favor in the most probable subjective consequence. This limitation is less harmful as it seems once three considerations are taken account of.

First, the ambivalence of interpretation is handled not simultaneously, but sequentially. People experiencing an interruption of their occupational career start do deal with their negative consequence, and detect positive ones only on second thought. The negative sides of the interruption are immediately apparent, but it takes some effort to detect its possibly positive sides. Someone, who has lost his job, for example, at first applies for social security support and searches for a new job, and then evaluates the pros and cons of his old and his possible new work. Thus, the challenges may show up only after the mischief has been managed and their possibly positive effects dwindle behind the inexorably negative effects.

Second, the ambivalence applies unequally to the interruptions according to their quality. It is small when the interruption is caused by an external agency – the economy in the case of unemployment and waiting, and nature in the case of disability. It is big when the interruption results from a decision between two competing domains – occupation and family in the case family periods. Particularly in the latter case, knowing the interpretation of the subjects could help to understand the negative effect of occupational interruptions on occupational life evaluation. It may be that a strong path from a positive evaluation on this effect switches the sign of the latter, and that this path is stronger for women than for men.

Third, the ambivalence may fade away over the life course. Because the negative consequences of interruptions are more prominent than the positive ones, they are also more enduring. This applies particularly to our longitudinal analysis. On the one hand, the surveyed failures happen over all episodes of the life course and attributions and motivations may differ between them and change later on. On the other hand, the life evaluation is surveyed at the end of active life when the motives for interruptions may have been blurred or forgotten, but their consequences may still be noticeable. Thus, it is plausible that attributions and motivations have lost causal power relative to the implicitly negative value of the occurrence.

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