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Time & Society

The Persistence of the Standardized Life Cycle

Mark Elchardus and Wendy Smits

ABSTRACT. This article investigates to what degree the standardized life cycle has been replaced by an individualized life course, characterized by the absence of a strict sequence and timing of life's transitions. In order to measure the normative position of people, rather than the external conditions to which they are subject, the test is based on the ideal life course or life cycle as described by a purely random sample of 4666 inhabitants of Belgium, aged 18 to 36. The available evidence overwhelmingly points towards the persistence of a standardized ideal life cycle, characterized by a strict sequence and timing of the important transitions. KEY WORDS • individualization • life cycle • open future • sequence • timing

Conceptions of the life cycle or the life course as a natural phenomenon have been largely replaced by the view that these temporal structures are a normatively anchored, man-made phenomenon, that imposes regularity on life's events and life's decisions, and thus affects the welfare and well-being of individuals and collectivities (Elchardus, 1984; Szinovacz and De Viney, 2001). The social sciences have, however, developed a starkly dualistic view of the properties of those structures. In much of the literature the opposing views of the life cycle or the life course are temporalized, that is, they are linked to different historical periods. The first of those can be labelled a period of strong standardization and homogenization, resulting in what will be called here a standardized life cycle. In contrast, the second period appears as a time of destandardization and individualization, in which the standardized life cycle in fact becomes an

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individualized life course or a 'choice biography' (du Bois-Reymond, 1998), resulting from individual, biographical decisions.

Two Views of the Life Cycle

The first period corresponds roughly to the industrial era, in which the structuration of the life cycle is said to become characterized by the increasingly strict sequence of education, work and retirement, or of the pre-active, active and post-active life stages (O'Rand, 1995; Settersten and Mayer, 1997; Scheepens, 1999; Marshall, 2001). The German sociologist Kohli described that process as the triangulation of the life cycle (Kohli and Rein, 1991). The life cycle of the industrial era is in fact considered by many authors as increasingly standardized, with clear distinctions between and an unambiguous sequential ordering of the different transitions and stages. That order is buttressed by law (e.g. the age of obligatory schooling or legal retirement), by the regulation of welfare provisions, such as access to pension systems (Breedveld, 1996; Scheepens, 1999; Smolenaars, 1999) and culturally anchored in general conceptions of time (Leccardi, 2005).

According to several authors a second, and radically different phase in the structuration (or rather destructuration) of the life cycle was initiated around the 1970s. The authors defending this position argue that the standardized life cycle is then increasingly being replaced by a life course or an individualized choice biography in which individuals take personal decisions concerning the timing and sequence of important life course transitions (de Hart, 1992; du Bois-Reymond and de Jong Gierveld, 1993; Peters et al., 1993; O'Rand, 1995; Scheepens, 1999; Marshall, 2001). This means that the timing of those transitions starts to show great variation (Liefbroer and Dykstra, 2000) and that the sequence of the transitions becomes less rigid. This results in the end of the 'traditional, ordered sequence' (Leccardi, 2005: 125), a development also described as the 'yo-yo-ization' of the life cycle: students interrupt their studies to work for a few years, people in the labour force temporarily return to school, pensioners take up work again, people marry before finishing their studies and so on (Liefbroer and de Jong Gierveld, 1993; Thomèse, 1995; Howard, 1998; Scheepens, 1999; OECD, 2000; Barou and Rigaudiat, 1983; Hoge Raad voor Werkgelegenheid, 2001). In short, the life cycle as a sequence of transitions and stages is being replaced by a series of positions that are simultaneously accessible and between which individuals can increasingly hop.

Various empirical analyses have already pointed out that reversals of the habitual sequence are in fact quite rare (Glorieux, 1985; Aymmard et al., 1996; Breedveld, 1996; Douglas, 1997; Glorieux et al., 2004). Contrary to the expectations raised by the destructuration thesis, the comparative survey of the

Families and Transitions in Europe project came to the conclusion that '(i)n exploring respondents' future perspectives, it is interesting to observe the widely shared expectation of a linear transition, within which, one event follows another in a predetermined order' (Biggart et al., 2003: 5). Yet, events indicative of a destructuration or individualization of the life cycle receive a lot of attention, often on the basis of qualitative research. This creates the impression that they are frequent and indicative of fundamental shift from a standardized life cycle to an individualized life course.

In this article we want to empirically gauge the extent to which this shift has indeed taken place in the population under study. Instead of temporalizing the two structures of the life cycle, we view them as two hypotheses about the way the scheduling of important transitions is organized in contemporary society. In order to clearly formulate those hypotheses, the concepts of life cycle, life course, (de)structuration and individualization will be more systematically defined in terms of temporal theory. This is done in the next section.

Elements of the Temporal Organization of Life

Life is not inherently temporal, but is temporalized because it is constrained by organic, psychological, cultural and other internal or external environments. The general characteristics of temporalization are twofold: first there has to be a difference between the relatively invariant and the relatively variant, second there has to be a sequence (Elchardus, 1988). Any structure can be said to be temporalized from the moment it allows for a distinction between relatively invariant and more variant properties, and allows for the sequential ordering of events and properties. A temporalized structure can also be used as a timekeeper. The sun dial, for instance, distinguishes between the relatively invariant dial and the variant shadow and inscribes the sequence of hours in its dial.

The temporalization of life is commonly performed through the distinction of stages, that are separated by transitions, and that are sequentially ordered (e.g. leaving the parental home, taking up a job, getting married etc.). In the case that a group is characterized by a common sequence of such stages, the stage a person is in can be used as a socially meaningful definition of age (e.g. the 'adult' is not the person who has attained the age of 18, but the person who left the parental home and has taken up a job). As a result of an historical process of rationalization and standardization of time (Thompson, 1967; Schöps, 1980; Zerubavel, 1980) we do, however, commonly express the position on this temporal structure in terms of clock time or chronological age. The modern temporalization of life is therefore not only described in terms of stages, transitions and the sequence of stages, but also in terms of the timing and the duration of transitions and stages, or the chronological age at which the transitions take

place. The fundamental, modern parameters of the temporalization of life are therefore the distinction of stages, the sequence of stages, and the timing of the transitions in and out of the stages.

In the light of these theoretical and conceptual clarifications it is possible to systematize the thesis of destructuration, referred to in the previous section. Theories of the life cycle situate the invariant in a cultural and institutionalized structure, the standardized life cycle, and the variable in the different individual lives shaped or oriented by that structure. The structure itself is constructed as a timed sequence of transitions leading to different, sequentially ordered life stages. It offers the individual a sequentially ordered view of his or her future life.

Theories claiming the end of the standardized or, as it is often called, linear life cycle, situate the invariant in the individual who is considered as an actor making (strategic) choices and building a choice biography. The sequential order is no longer the one fixed in the life cycle, but the result of the individual's choices among manifold possibilities. The stages are no longer sequentially ordered, but simultaneously assessable positions. This is the reason why the thesis of the destandardization of the life cycle is closely linked to, is in fact a specification of, the more general individualization thesis (du Bois-Reymond and de Jong Gierveld, 1993; Peters et al., 1993; Furlong and Cartmel, 1997; du Bois-Reymond, 1998; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). Viewed in this way, the discussion about the existence of a standardized life cycle is, in fact, a discussion about the fundamental features of contemporary society and of that society's attitude with regard to time.

The empirical validity of the two positions, of course, hinges on the extent to which there still is, within a given population, and despite diversity within that population, agreement on the sequence of stages and the appropriate timing of the transitions. Yet, various possibilities remain as to how to measure that agreement.

It is obvious that both the life cycle and the life course can be described in more or less detail. As the descriptions become more sensitive to detail, one approaches an idiosyncratic life story for which even the format of a biography might be too constraining, compared to that of the novel. In almost all of the research about the life cycle, the transitions and stages focused on pertain to a limited number of stages defined in terms of education, family life and labour market status. The discussions about the standardization and destandardization of the life cycle, referred to earlier, are all concerned with stages and transitions defined in that specific way. We will follow that practice in this article.

A much more important question about the way in which agreement about the sequence of stages and the timing of transitions should be measured concerns the distinction between the internal and the external environments of action (Alexander, 1983: 36–44). A constraint emanating from the external environ-

ment would mean that external constraint or necessity force the individuals into a specific temporal pattern. Internal constraints mean that a view of how life should be conducted has been sufficiently internalized and/or institutionalized to become meaningful, normative and desirable. An actual biography, like most social phenomena, is a combination of both internal and external constraints. Many authors have pointed out that the actual life course an individual follows can and should be regarded as a compromise between that individual's ideals and norms on the one hand and the externally imposed conditions under which he or she has to try to respect those norms and realize those ideals on the other hand (Buchmann, 1989; Liefbroer and de Jong Gierveld, 1993; Hareven et al., 1999). Therefore we insist that internal and external constraints should be analytically and empirically distinguished. The question whether the life cycle still exists has to be phrased in terms of internal constraints: is there still, within a given population, a consensus concerning a sequence of stages and a conception of the timing of transitions that is considered ideal? It is only when such a cultural phenomenon has been established that the question can be raised whether present-day conditions and constraints do force strong deviations from that ideal pattern, to the extent that one might fear its erosion. If the destructuration of the life cycle would be solely a matter of external constraint, it would be inappropriate to relate it to changing conceptions of time, to a cultural process like individualization or to new patterns of institutionalization. In fact, many of the authors positing a destructuration of the life cycle explicitly link that development to a cultural or normative shift in the direction of greater individualization and individualism, which expresses itself in the tendency of more people to deviate from conventions, collectively held norms and traditions, and to make more personal decisions (du Bois-Reymond and de Jong Gierveld, 1993; Peters et al., 1993; Furlong and Cartmel, 1997; du Bois-Reymond, 1998; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). For all these reasons a shift in the nature of the structuration of life should be judged on the basis of the ideal or normative conception of the life cycle, rather than on the basis of the (forced) adaptation to (externally imposed) conditions. If the destructuration was only a matter of forced deviation from an existing ideal form, then there would be no reason to speak of a new conception of the life cycle. In this article we therefore primarily address the question whether the life cycle still exists as an internal environment of action. In the conclusions we shall, however, also address the question to what extent the actual behaviour deviates from the ideal form.

In linking the theory to specific hypotheses and their operationalization, a last question has to be addressed. The existence of a standardized life cycle has been explained by different social theorists as a simplifying and coordinating device. Talcott Parsons (1951) for instance, sought the rationale for temporal structures in their functionality for coordination: they acted 'so that different times are set apart for different activities, with different people' (p. 301). A similar argument

is made by Niklas Luhmann (1976) who sees the life cycle as a mechanism of simplification: because it fixes a sequence of stages, it tells the individual what should come next and hence reduces the openness and complexity of the future. Luhmann calls this 'defuterizing the future' (p. 141). These functionalist arguments can of course not be taken to mean that the standardized life cycle should exist (drawing such an implication would be a functionalist fallacy). Yet, they do suggest that a weakening or a disappearance of a standardized life cycle will be accompanied by a higher complexity of life and increased demands for reflexivity and flexibility of the individuals. The thesis of individualization does indeed posit a higher level of reflexivity in the individuals (Giddens, 1991). The internal logic of its position does indeed seem to compel the theory of the destructuration of the life cycle to posit a more reflexive individual, acting as a strategic actor and making choices, as compared to a 'traditional' actor who unthinkingly followed the standardized or linear life cycle. Biggart et al. (2003: 10) for instance, claim that very formal transition and trajectory models exist side by side with individualization of the transitions, because the transitions within the life cycle model are now guided by personal choice, while presumably they were before not guided by personal choice. We think that this is an empirically indefensible position. First, because there is no solid evidence about how people before made their life cycle choices. Assuming them to be unthinking cultural dopes seems too simplistic. Second, and more importantly, one should make a very clear distinction between the justification used in explaining choices on the one hand, the factors, internally or externally, constraining the choices on the other. There is ample evidence that contemporary strategies of justification tend to emphasize personal choice, rather than tradition or convention (Wood and Zurcher, 1988). While 100 years ago explaining one's actions in terms of duty, tradition and convention gave dignity, today an explanation in terms of personal choice gives dignity. One should, however, not confuse such rationalization or justification of action with the internal and external constraints orienting the action. Therefore the thesis of the individualization of the life cycle should not be based on the justification strategies actors use in talking about their life course decisions, but on the observable results of those decisions. Individualization only exists when the ideals of individuals start to show greater individual variation with regard to the sequence of the stages and the timing of the transitions.

Empirically Evaluating the Destructuration Thesis

As argued earlier, our point of departure, guiding the way we test the destructuration thesis, is that the extent to which the transition from a standardized life cycle to an individualized life course has already taken place, should be

measured on the basis of the ideal conception of the life course. Therefore the respondents were asked, 'What is *for you the ideal age* at which the following events should take place?' followed by a description of the different transitions (the first sexual encounter, obtaining one's driving licence, the right to vote, the first job experience, becoming financially independent, completing one's studies, cohabitating with a companion, marriage, birth of the first child, buying a home, birth of the last child, pension or final labour market). The notion of 'ideal' was purposefully not specified, but linked to the personal opinion of the respondent. Therefore it can refer to a personal preference as well as to a social norm by which the respondent wants to abide. The primary purpose of phrasing the question in that way was to avoid respondents referring to what they think others consider appropriate or ideal, but would give their personal opinion of what is desirable.

The analysis is based on a random sample of 4666 inhabitants of Belgium, aged between 18 and 36. They were interviewed by way of a written questionnaire during the first months of 2004.[1]

One of the aims of the research was to see whether the reported ideals had the characteristics of collectively held and standardized norms or showed on the contrary the variation one would expect to find in individualized choices. Five criteria or tests will be used to judge which is the case or, phrased differently, whether we should still speak about an ideal standardized life cycle or, rather, acknowledge the existence of a normative and cultural shift towards an individualized life course.

1. A destandardization or individualization of the life cycle should result in great variation around the mean ideal age of the different transitions;
2. It should result in 'yo-yo-ization' or in a weakening of the ideal sequential order, in the sense that many individuals will advance different sequential orders as ideal;
3. Individualization also implies that the ideal is adapted to the personal life situation and hence varies with, among other things, the age of the respondent;
4. The extent to which an ideal standardized life cycle persists can also be gauged from the way the life course adapts to prolonged, post-secondary education. If this feature of the life course is adapted to by loosening the sequence and/or by increasing the variation around the ages of transition, then this can be interpreted as a sign of individualization. If it is adapted to homeostatically, by respecting the sequence and by simply postponing transitions subsequent to the end of formal education, then a strong argument for the persistence of an ideal standardized life cycle can be made;
5. If the life cycle is individualized, the number of transitions completed should have no or weak effects on the extent to which people consider a change of

the future life course possible and/or probable. If future life possibilities are seriously narrowed as more transitions are completed, then this means that those transitions are considered irreversible or difficult to reverse, which would make returning in the sequence more difficult. With this test one can indeed see to what extent the stages are no longer considered stages, foreclosing future possibilities, but simultaneously accessible positions.

The variation of the ideal timing of transitions

The ideal timing of transition is presented in Table 1. There is, in the population under study, a rather strong consensus concerning the ideal ages at which the various transitions should take place. Of the 12 variation coefficients, 10 are smaller than .20. This means that the standard deviation is 2/10ths of the average, which is considered small. Only the ideal age of two transitions shows a somewhat greater variance: the age at which the right to vote is obtained and the age deemed ideal to stop studying. The largest of them is still smaller than 1/3rd of the mean.

TABLE 1
Ideal Age

	N	25%	50%	75%	Mean	Standard Deviation	Coefficient of variation ($\sigma/\bar{x}$)
First sexual intercourse	4422	16.0	17.0	18.0	17.53	2.23	0.13
Driving licence	4525	18.0	18.0	19.0	18.59	2.45	0.13
Voting age	4425	18.0	18.0	20.0	19.21	5.33	0.28
First work experience	4471	18.0	20.0	23.0	20.32	3.61	0.18
Financial autonomy	4445	20.0	22.0	24.0	22.20	3.62	0.16
End of studies	4404	20.0	22.0	24.0	22.52	5.55	0.25
Cohabitation	4418	22.0	24.0	25.0	23.66	3.28	0.14
Marriage	4297	25.0	25.0	28.0	26.40	5.03	0.19
First child	4478	25.0	26.0	28.0	26.41	3.21	0.12
Purchase of a house	4465	25.0	27.0	30.0	27.60	4.24	0.15
Last child	4433	30.0	35.0	35.0	34.15	4.48	0.13
Retirement	4477	55.0	59.0	60.0	57.73	5.31	0.09

Another way of looking at the variation in the timing of transitions is offered by the interquartiles. The difference between the age younger than anybody deems ideal and the age which everybody considers too old for the transition concerned, is rather sudden, as Figure 1 indicates. The ages at which the transition should have taken place according to 25 per cent of the respondents and the ages at which it should already have taken place according to 75 per cent of the

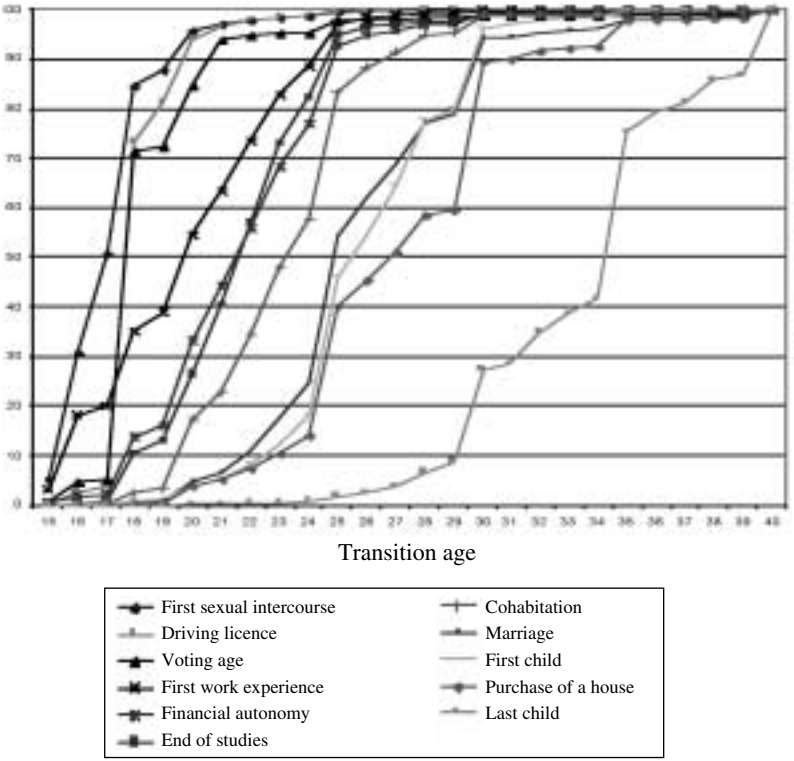

FIGURE 1
The ideal life course

respondents, are also given in Table 1. A large difference between those ages would indicate destandardization and individualization, a small difference indicates the persistence of a standardized ideal or norm. The differences increase as the transition is situated later in life. For the acquisition of a home, the birth of the last child and retirement, it is five years. For transitions that occur early in life it is one to two years. On average for all transitions it is 3.6 years.

While the literature about the destandardization or individualization of the life cycle does not formulate precise, let alone quantitative, criteria to judge the extent of those processes, both the variation coefficients and interquartiles comparisons suggest that the ideal life cycle is still characterized by a quite strictly standardized timing of important transitions. As far as the timing of transitions is concerned, there are, in other words, no serious indications of a destandardization.

TABLE 2
Correlation between chronological age and ideal transition age

	Pearson's correlation coefficient between chronological age and ideal age
Last child	0.202 (p = 0.000)
First work experience	0.096 (p = 0.000)
First sexual intercourse	0.085 (p = 0000)
Purchase of a house	0.066 (p = 0.000)
End of studies	0.043 (p = 0.005)
First child	0.042 (p = 0.005)
Cohabitation	0.042 (p = 0.005)
Voting age	0.040 (p = 0.008)
Marriage	0.035 (p = 0.023)
Driving licence	–0.031 (p = 0.039)
Financial autonomy	–0.049 (p = 0.001)
Retirement	–0.074 (p = 0.000)

The ideal sequence

The ideal averages and modal ages do follow a sequential order, but from that observation one can of course not conclude that the majority of the respondents consider that sequence as ideal. An appropriate way to verify whether the latter is in fact the case is offered by the cumulative Mokken Scale (Mokken and Lewis, 1982). When the different transitions do form such a scale, one can conclude that they form a real sequence for the population concerned, in the sense that people with a different sequence form a small and statistically negligible minority. The results of the test[2] indicate that the different transitions do form a strong and reliable Mokken Scale, indicating that in the population under study there is a strong consensus concerning the sequence of these transitions. This persistence of a clear and unambiguous sequential ordering of the transitions obviously, and strongly, contradicts the thesis of destandardization.

The ideal life cycle seen at different ages

If a destandardization or individualization of the life course has occurred, then, one would expect that the view of the ideal ages is adapted to the personal situation and especially to the passage of time or chronological age. If individuals no longer adhere to a collectively held view of the life cycle, they should certainly adapt their personal view of that cycle to their own circumstances, particularly their age. In that case one would expect rather strong relationships

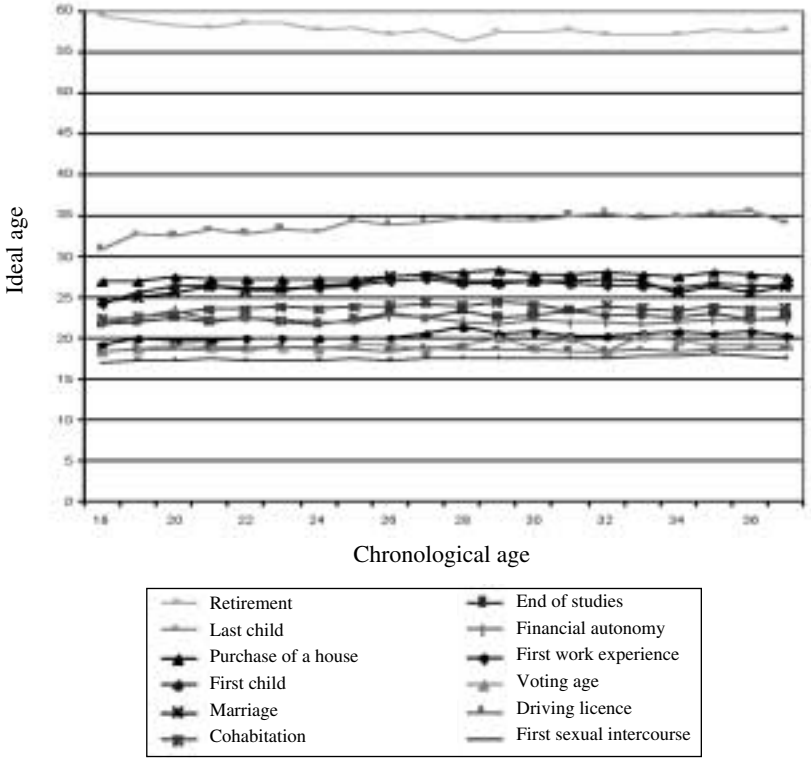

FIGURE 2
Relationship between ideal age and chronological age

between chronological age and the age advanced as ideal for the different transitions. As Figure 2 indicates, this is absolutely not the case. For almost all transitions the ideal ages form a well nigh horizontal line when plotted against the chronological age of the respondents, which indicates very weak relationships between the ideal age advanced for various transitions and the chronological age of the respondent.

There is one possible exception to this general picture: the age appropriate for the birth of the last child (the age up to which children can be born) turned out to be related, albeit rather weakly, to the chronological age ($r = 0.20$; see Table 2). As they grow older (and postpone child bearing), people somewhat advance the age they deem appropriate for procreation.

TABLE 3
Age at which 25, 50 and 75 per cent of the respondents consider a certain transition as ideal to level of education

	First sexual intercourse	Driving licence	Voting age	First work experience	Financial autonomy	End of studies	Cohabitation	Marriage	First child	Purchase of a house	Last child	Retirement
Only primary education or less												
25 %	16	18	18	18	18	18	20	23	24	25	30	55
50 %	17	18	18	19	20	20	22	25	25	25	35	58
75 %	18	19	20	21	22	22	25	29	28	30	36	60
Secondary vocational and technical												
25 %	16	18	18	18	20	20	21	24	25	25	30	55
50 %	17	18	18	20	21	21	23	25	25	25	35	57
75 %	18	18	20	21	23	23	25	28	28	30	35	60
Secondary general												
25 %	16	18	18	18	20	21	22	25	25	25	31	55
50 %	18	18	18	21	22	22	24	25	26	28	35	56
75 %	18	19	20	23	24	24	25	30	29	30	36	60
Post-secondary, technical college												
25 %	16	18	18	18	21	22	23	25	25	25	32	55
50 %	18	18	18	21	23	23	24	26	27	28	35	60
75 %	18	19	20	23	25	24	25	28	29	30	36	60
University												
25 %	17	18	18	20	23	23	23	25	26	27	33	55
50 %	18	18	18	23	24	24	25	27	28	30	35	60
75 %	18	19	18	24	25	25	25	30	30	30	36	65
TOTAL (50%)	17	18	18	20	22	22	24	25	26	27	35	59

Since the plotted relationships appear linear, it is appropriate to use the correlations coefficients to judge the strength of the relationship (see Table 2). With the already noted exception of the birth of the last child, all correlations are very small, indicating negligible relationships. All coefficients are smaller than 0.10, and 7 out of the 12 smaller than 0.05. They are statistically significant, but that is due in large part to the large sample size ($N = 4666$).

The ideal life cycle is not only characterized by a consensus concerning the sequence and by a relatively sharp timing, that timing is moreover strongly invariant with regard to chronological age, which again contradict the destandardization thesis.

The adaptation of the ideal life cycle to post-secondary education

It is obvious that the ideal life cycle will be affected by post-secondary education and must in some way differ between, on the one hand the people who stop studying before or after the completion of secondary schooling and, on the other, those who pursue tertiary education. The way in which this adaptation takes place can shed light on the extent to which the life cycle is destandardized or individualized. Indeed, people pursuing tertiary education are likely to feel the cross-pressures generated by the existing ideal life cycle on the one hand, and the expectation to successfully pursue their studies on the other. It is conceivable that they adapt by destandardizing the life cycle, frequently deviating from the ideal sequence or even inversing the sequence, and by showing greater variation in the timing of transition than the rest of the population. In that sense they could act as a kind of avant-garde of the destandardization of the life cycle. Some authors do indeed expect them to fulfil that role (Kuijsten, 1999; Dykstra, 2003).

It is, however, also conceivable that they respect the ideal sequence, do not show more variation in timing than the rest of the population, and adapt to their situation by simply postponing those transitions that are subsequent to the completion of their studies. The latter would be a minimal or homeostatic adaptation, leaving the existing pattern (the ideal life cycle) as unchanged as possible. If that turns out to be the case, it would be a very strong argument in favour of the persistence of the standardized life cycle.

Table 3 shows that the ideal sequence is almost completely invariant with regard to level of education. Prolonged education does not change the sequence. Deviations from the ideal sequence are in fact quite rare. When they occur, they concern the sequence between marriage and having the first child. The ideal life cycle (see Table 1) indicates that (unmarried) cohabitation is now regarded as a stage in the life cycle that should precede marriage and procreation by about three years. Marriage, home ownership and child bearing are now situated close together in time. In the ideal life cycle uncovered here, they occur almost simultaneously. Child bearing is regarded by many as the reason for marriage and marriage as the consolidation of cohabitation, making it fit for procreation. People under 28 years of age situate marriage immediately before child bearing; people over 28 tend to see the birth of the first child as ideally preceding marriage.

Even more surprising than the invariance of the sequence with regard to level of education is that the variance of the ideal timing of the transitions is in fact

TABLE 4
Ideal age – coefficient of variation to level of education

	Only primary education or less			Secondary technical and vocational			Secondary general			Post-secondary technical college			University		
	$\bar{x}$	σ	cv*	$\bar{x}$	σ	cv	$\bar{x}$	σ	cv	$\bar{x}$	σ	cv	$\bar{x}$	σ	cv
First child	25.3	3.6	0.14	25.9	3.1	0.12	26.8	2.9	0.11	27.0	3.0	0.11	27.6	3.1	0.11
Last child	34.2	5.7	0.17	33.5	4.5	0.13	34.6	4.4	0.13	34.4	4.1	0.12	35.1	3.5	0.10
Purchase of a house	26.9	4.8	0.18	26.8	4.1	0.15	28.1	4.6	0.17	28.0	3.7	0.13	29.2	4.0	0.14
Marriage	26.0	6.1	0.24	25.8	4.3	0.17	26.9	6.7	0.25	26.9	5.1	0.19	27.4	4.5	0.16
Cohabition	22.7	3.3	0.15	23.3	3.8	0.16	23.7	2.7	0.12	24.1	2.5	0.11	24.5	2.5	0.10
End of studies	21.0	4.3	0.20	21.5	4.9	0.23	22.6	2.5	0.11	23.4	5.3	0.23	24.9	8.1	0.32
Financial autonomy	21.2	4.0	0.19	21.4	4.2	0.19	22.1	2.8	0.13	23.0	3.0	0.13	23.8	2.1	0.09
First sexual intercourse	17.5	2.3	0.13	17.4	2.7	0.16	17.7	1.8	0.10	17.6	1.6	0.09	17.7	1.8	0.10
Retirement	57.2	5.8	0.10	57.0	5.4	0.09	57.4	4.5	0.08	57.9	5.1	0.09	59.8	5.0	0.08
First work experience	19.6	3.2	0.16	19.4	3.3	0.17	20.8	4.1	0.20	21.0	3.6	0.17	21.9	3.7	0.17
Driving licence	18.7	2.1	0.11	18.6	2.9	0.16	18.7	3.8	0.20	18.6	1.7	0.09	18.5	1.1	0.06
Voting age	19.9	7.3	0.37	19.4	6.0	0.31	19.5	6.3	0.32	19.1	4.1	0.22	18.4	1.5	0.08

* cv = coefficient of variation.

smaller for the people with post-secondary schooling than for the others. Table 4 indicates that the coefficient of variation is smaller for most of the transitions. The only exception is the ideal age of ending the studies. Concerning this transition, the group of higher educated young adults is more heterogeneous than the less educated people.

People with secondary schooling adapt the ideal life cycle to their situation by simply advancing the ideal age for those transitions that are immediately linked to their prolonged education or subsequent to the completion of education in the ideal life cycle. The ideal age to finish studies is situated at 21 years (median age) by people not pursuing post-secondary education and at 25 years by people pursuing higher education. The ideal age for transitions preceding education is the same for both groups, with a slight difference for the right to vote: people who pursued university studies see 18 (the actual voting age) to 19 as ideal. Many of the young adults with less schooling are convinced that more maturity is needed to vote and situate the ideal age for voting around 20 years of age. The ideal age for transitions subsequent to education, such as becoming financially independent, cohabitating, marriage, father- or motherhood, home ownership and retirement, is situated later, in all cases four to five years later, with the exception of retirement which is situated three years later.

These observations strongly contradict the thesis of destandardization and individualization and highlight the extent to which the ideal, standardized life cycle constrains the ways in which people placed in a situation in which they are forced to deviate, adapt with a minimum of deviation.

The life cycle and the open future

The thesis of a destandardized life cycle in which the stages do become positions that are simultaneously and no longer sequentially accessible is closely related to and, in fact, premised on, the idea that contemporary individuals avoid consequential engagements or make their engagements easily reversible (Adriaansen and Zijderveld, 1981; Lipovetsky, 1983; Brose, 1988). It is obvious that a greater reversibility of engagements (in work, family, parenthood etc.) is a necessary condition for the weakening of the sequential order of the life cycle and a way of keeping the future open despite engagements already taken or transitions already completed.

The extent to which people believe that they still enjoy an open future and that everything is still possible in their lives is measured on the basis of a question with four answering possibilities. Table 5 gives the answers together with the average and median age of the group agreeing with each item, as well as the average number of the transitions already completed by each group. The transitions counted here are those listed in the description of the ideal life cycle, minus retirement and with divorce/separation added.

TABLE 5
Relationship between attitude with regard to the open future, chronological and social age

	%	Chronological age		Mean number of transitions (social age 0–9)
		Mean	Median	
• Nothing is decided yet in my life, all options are still open	30.8%	25.7	25	2.62
• Despite everything I have already done, I think that I can still give a different direction to my life if I wished to do so	46.1%	28.1	28	4.05
• I think it is difficult to still change my life significantly	20.3%	30.2	32	5.45
• I think it has become well nigh impossible to change my life	2.9%	30.9	32	6.15
TOTAL	100%	27.8		3.83
P		0.00		0.00
η^2		9.4		15.6

It is obvious that as (chronological) age advances or more transitions are completed, people experience a progressive closure of their future. In fact when the effects of age and the number of completed transitions are simultaneously controlled for, it turns out that it is the latter that influences the attitude with regard to the open future. Its influence can clearly be seen in Figure 3. The proportion of people claiming that in their life nothing is decided yet and all options are open, declines from more that 50 per cent for people who have not yet completed one transition, to 0 per cent for people who have completed nine transitions. The proportion claiming that it has become well nigh impossible to change their life, goes from 0 per cent when no transitions are completed to more that 20 per cent when nine transitions are completed.

All this shows that many people consider the different transitions as consequential engagements that progressively close the future and in that way also buttress a sequential order of the stages of the life cycle. Yet, despite the strong effect of the number of completed transitions (and indirectly of chronological

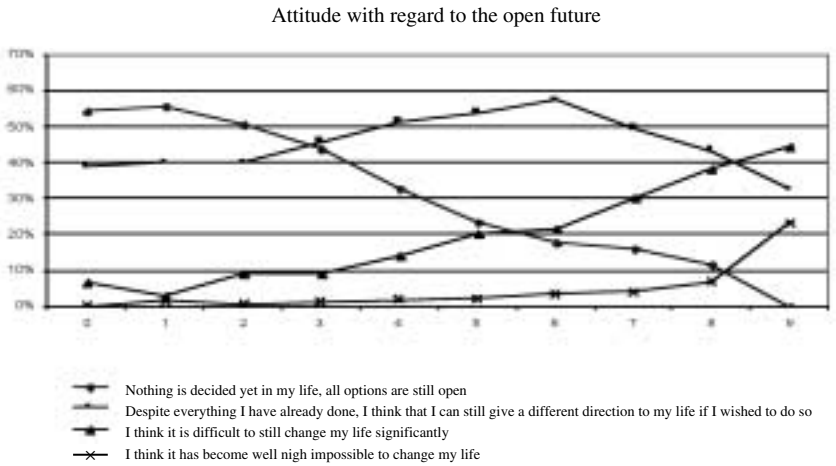

FIGURE 3
Relationship between number of transitions already completed (social age) and attitude with regard to the open future

age) the respondents in general believe in an open future. Even after nine transitions about a third of the respondents still think that they could change their lives and give them a different direction, if they would really want to. Maybe it is this belief in the openness of the future, rather than the effect of transitions on that belief, which has led some authors to conclude erroneously that transitions were judged to be increasingly reversible.

The claim that the effect of transitions on the openness of the future is declining is, of course, much more difficult to verify than the hypothesis that the life cycle is destandardized. Fortunately the same question about the open future was asked in a survey of 1988 (Elchardus and Heyvaert, 1990), so that at least change from 1988 to 2004, over a period of 16 years, can be mapped (see Table 6).

From Table 6 it is clear that the changes are minimal in the population under consideration (21 to 36 years old). Yet, there is a very slight increase in the openness of the future, which is statistically significant at the .05 level, but not at stricter levels.

TABLE 6
Percentage of 21- to 36-year-old people who have chosen the following answer possibilities in 1988 and in 2004 (row %) (N = 4555)

	Nothing is decided yet in my life, all options are still open	Despite everything I have already done, I think that I can still give a different direction to my life if I wished to do so	I think it is difficult to still change my life significantly	I think it has become well nigh impossible to change my life
TOR88 (n = 505)	29.9%	42.2%	24.2%	3.8%
Life course 2004 (n = 4050)	30.9%	46.6%	19.8%	2.8%
TOTAL	30.8%	46.1%	20.3%	2.9%

Note. $\chi^2 = 7.82$; $df = 3$; $p = 0.05$.

TABLE 7
Observed and real age for the completion of a number of transitions

Transitions	Ideal age	Observed age	% of research population completed
End of studies	22.2	20.4	81.0
First work experience	20.2	20.7	80.7
Financial autonomy/ Leaving parents' home*	21.7**	22.0***	64.2***
Cohabitation	23.0	23.1	46.4
Marriage	24.9	24.2	36.4
First child	25.3	25.5	36.3
Purchase of home	26.3	26.0	39.5

* We asked about the ideal age of financial autonomy, not the ideal age of leaving the parental home; we asked about the real age of leaving the parental home, not the real age of financial autonomy.
** Financial autonomy.
*** Leaving the parental home.

Conclusion

All of the tests performed lead to the conclusion that the thesis of the individualization of the life course should be rejected. There might be a modest evolution in that direction, but there are no compelling arguments to assume that this evolution will continue or be irreversible. Looking at the situation today, it is

clear that an ideal life course still exists, which is characterized by an unambiguous sequential order and a surprisingly strict timing of the transitions. Life is ordered on the basis of a chronologically rather rigid, ideal temporal structure. New developments do not lead to a destructuration of the life cycle but to adaptations. Cohabitation now precedes marriage by a couple of years, leaving the parents' home comes after the first work experience. Even a potentially very disturbing event, like prolonged education, is accommodated within this life cycle by minimal, homeostatic adaptation: the postponement of transitions posterior to the completion of education. As people complete more of the sequentially ordered transitions of this life cycle, they have the impression that their future progressively closes, which indicates that they do not consider the transitions as (easily) reversible. Certainly when they are taken into account simultaneously, those different observations strongly contradict the thesis of a destandardization of the life cycle and of the emergence of an individualized life course.

This still leaves open the possibility that a linear, sequentially ordered and quite strictly timed ideal life cycle persists, while conditions force young people to increasingly deviate from such ideal. In that case it would certainly not be correct to link the factual fading of the life cycle to cultural or value shifts or individualization, but one could under such conditions expect the ideals to eventually adapt to the frequently forced deviations. Yet, such a development does seem very plausible since a major challenge to the standardized life cycle, the prolonged education and the very different life situations of people with low and high levels of education, turned out to be homeostatically adapted to. Our data are not meant to study the actual development of the life cycle. That would require cohort analysis. Yet, taking into account the limitations of our data in this respect, we shall compare the timing and sequence of realized transitions to the ideals. One should take into account that in our sample the people that have already completed a transition are those that do so at a relatively early age, compared to those that have not yet completed the transition.

For transitions that have been completed by at least about 40 per cent of the respondents, Table 7 gives the real and ideal ages. With the exception of the age at which the respondents stop going to school or university, the observed and ideal average ages do almost perfectly correspond. It is clear that in the population under study there is an educational deficit: the ideal age up to which people want to study lies on average about two years higher than the actual age.

When one looks at the age at the different transition, not in terms of averages but in terms of the relationship between the individually observed ideal and the real ages for seven transitions, the correlation equals .42. That the completion of transitions rather strictly follows a timing based on chronological age, also appears form the correlation coefficient of no less than 0.77 between the chronological age and the number of transitions that have already been completed.

Yo-yo-ing or the occupation of a combination of stages that appears incongruent in terms of the observed ideal sequence is also relatively rare. Cohabitation while still studying is observed in 10 per cent of the respondents; cohabitation before the first work experience in 7.5 per cent. Living in the parental home and already having a child occurs in 1.9 per cent of the cases. Even studying while having a job is relatively rare in the population under study, and only observed in 8.1 per cent of the respondents. While there is some disagreement, at the level of the ideal, as to whether home ownership should precede parenthood or come after it, the combination of having a child without being home owners only occurs in 17.6 per cent of the cases.

Within the limits of our data, that is, for the respondents that have already completed a number of transitions, there is a very close correspondence between the ideal and the observed. The numbers occupying incongruent stages are small, sometimes surprisingly small in the light of the extensive provisions and special programmes that are offered by many universities to promote study while working or that are made through the social security system and time credit systems, in order to promote a return to school for adults.

The linear or traditional life cycle appears to be very solidly established as an ideal in the population studied here, and, in as far as our data allow such a judgement, deviations from that ideal appear limited.

The thesis of the destructuration or individualization of the life cycle seems in fact so far removed from reality that one can but raise the question of why it is so popular and so readily believed. The answer can conceivably be sought in the kind of research methodology that is often used when advancing it. As stated in the introduction to this article, the thesis is often temporalized and argued on the basis of the contrast between the strong standardizing tendencies of the industrial era and the destandardizing tendencies that presumably set it in the 1970s. By phrasing the question in that way, one has to rely on historical comparisons and hence on research evidence that does not allow to make the crucial distinctions between the internal and external environments of action or between an ideal or normative level of action on the one hand, and the adaptation to circumstances on the other. Yet the inherently cultural notion of individualization presupposes just such a distinction. Moreover, the arguments in favour of the destandardization thesis are often based on qualitative evidence, highlighting cases the striking character of which is then mistaken for statistical significance or immediately and without solid reasons assumed to illustrate a strong trend or tendency. Qualitative research is also sensitive to the discourses of justification used by the respondents. Contemporary discourses are likely to emphasize individual choice, rather than institutional or cultural constraints.

Yet, we believe that the reasons for the popularity of the individualization thesis might be more profound and closely linked up with dominant or hegemonic cultural frames of reference of the modern era. These also explain why

signs of a shift towards destandardization are immediately interpreted as a trend characteristic of the dynamics of modernity. An important aspect of those frames of reference is the belief in an open future. Luhmann (1976) has persuasively argued that the belief in an open future is a feature of the modern historical consciousness. It can be applied to history, as well as to the life course. Yet, for history as well as the personal life course one should be careful to make the distinction between the way in which these phenomena are viewed and the way in which they are structured. A belief in the openness of history does not necessarily change historical regularities or increase the degree to which social change can be engineered, just as the belief in an open life need not trivialize the commitments connected to life's transitions. The belief in the open future seems to be one of the ways in which modern men and women keep alive the possibility of boundless individual choice and opportunity, in the face of life's strictures. A large part of the social science approach of the life cycle seems to have been an attempt to buttress that belief in the open future and to describe crucial institutions, such as the life cycle, as if they were adapting to that belief. The tendency to do so can have been stimulated by a mechanism Simmel (1903/1989) and later Adorno (1967) highlighted long ago. Simmel was convinced that cities reduced the chances for individualism because they tended to standardize subjectivity, through what he called 'objectified culture'. That, according to Simmel, was the reason why fierce individualists like Nietzsche tended to hate the city, but also why city dwellers loved thinkers like Nietzsche precisely because their extreme individualism spoke to their frustrated desires and aspirations for subjective autonomy, exacerbated by a shrinking space to realize them. A similar thesis is advanced by Theodor Adorno, commenting on Veblen. The chances for individualization become smaller due to the impact of standardized consumption, and as they do so, the realization of individualism or the belief in personal autonomy and choice are sought in even greater participation in consumption. In the same way we would suggest that while the life cycle stays strongly standardized, some parts of social science fulfil the task of squaring that fact with the aspiration for an open future, backing the belief that we are escaping from the standardization of the life cycle, exchanging standardized life for a strongly individualized life course.

Notes

1. The questionnaire was mailed to a pure random sample of 10,000 inhabitants aged 18 to 36, according to the method of Total Quality Control. Forty-seven per cent of the sample returned a completely filled-in questionnaire. This sample was weighted for age and level of education. The coefficients used for weighting varied between 0.56 and 2.8.
2. The analysis was performed using MSPWIN5.0 (Mokken Scale analysis for

Polytomous Items) (Molenaar and Sijtsma, 2000). To examine if the 11 transitions are cumulative, we calculate for each age the Loevinger's coefficient for homogenity H, which is an indication of the scalability of the transitions. These coefficients are calculated on basis of the number of errors. An error is a deviation of the assumed sequence. With 0.39 < Hij < 0.64 we can speak of a strong hierarchy. The P-coefficient, which is a measure of internal consistency, has values between 0.47 and 0.88.

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