Misleading norms and vulnerability in the life course: definition and illustrations

Eric Widmer[1,2] & Dario Spini[1,3]

1. Swiss National Centre of Competence in Research LIVES: Overcoming Vulnerability, Universities of Lausanne and Geneva
2. Department of Sociology, University of Geneva, Switzerland
3. Institute of Social Sciences, University of Lausanne, Switzerland

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Correspondence concerning this article should be sent to Eric Widmer, University of Geneva, Department of Sociology, 40 Bd du pont d'Arve, CH-1211 Geneva, Switzerland, Eric.Widmer@unige.ch.

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Abstract

While research has stressed the positive aspects of compliance to social norms across the life course, little attention has been paid to the possible negative consequences of conforming to established norms and how such conformity may increase individual vulnerability. This review paper investigates the potentially misleading character of social norms in the field of life course research, with a focus on gender norms. It asserts that conformity to some gender norms that are related to the division of paid and family work becomes counterproductive for individuals who experience turning points in their life along the way. We present various empirical results which are mainly drawn from the Swiss National Centre of Competence in Research LIVES (NCCR LIVES; www.lives-nccr.ch) and that exemplify situations in which conformity to social norms has detrimental effects on life trajectories. We conclude by stressing that the sensitizing concept of misleading norms contributes to a better understanding of vulnerability across the life course.

Research has mainly stressed the positive aspects of individual compliance with social norms across the life course and the negative consequences of deviance from social norms. However, more attention should be paid to the vulnerability processes of conforming with established norms. One area of research in which normative conformity has been criticized concerns gender. Various studies have stressed that gender norms predispose a highly unequal accumulation of resources and specialization processes among men and women, thus delegating both males and females to particular roles. We use this field of research to present misleading norms as a sensitizing concept (Blumer, 1969) and stress the mismatch between social structures and social norms as a root of individual vulnerability across the life course. Based on the framework that is proposed by Spini, Bernardi and Oris (this issue), we develop the idea that misleading norms are reproduced under the influence of multilevel processes, from the individual, to intermediate groupings and networks, to society at large.

This paper focuses on one empirical example of misleading norms: the potential negative consequences for a large number, if not a majority, of individuals in contemporary western society of complying with gender norms regarding the division of child care and paid work. We assert that conformity to such gender norms is counterproductive for individuals who experience critical events later in life. The following sections first summarize some results about deviance and conformity to norms in life course research. Then, the paper proposes an alternative by defining the concept of misleading norms from a life course perspective which stresses the importance of changing life circumstances for understanding the impact of normative conformity. Third, based on empirical illustrations, the paper summarizes studies that are drawn from the Swiss National Centre of Competence in Research LIVES (www.lives-nccr.ch) with regard to the question of how some gender norms increase vulnerability at three different stages of the life course

— the transition to parenthood, divorce and family re-composition, and family interactions of the elderly. This paper also presents some multilevel influences that account for the reproduction of misleading norms, notably personal networks and normative climates. The paper concludes by stressing that the concept of misleading norms contributes to a better understanding of vulnerability across the life course beyond gender issues by sensitizing scholars and stakeholders to the negative effects for individuals of normative conformity priorly in the life course in several circumstances.

Vulnerabilization by conformity to social norms

A social norm is defined as "a generally accepted way of thinking, feeling or behaving that is endorsed and expected because it is perceived to be the right and proper thing to do. It is a rule or standard shared by members of a social group that prescribes appropriate, expected or desirable attitudes and conduct in matters relevant to the group" (Turner, 1991, p. 3). All norms are associated with potential sanctions, positive or negative, formal or informal (Scott & Marshal, 2009). Social norms can be detected explicitly or implicitly in social policies, institutions and organizations, as much as they can be expressed in social relationships in the form of stereotypes.

There is an intriguing absence of literature documenting the negative outcomes of norm compliance, possibly due to the implicit assumption that normative conformity is approved by society and triggers positive reactions (Popa, Phillips, & Robertson, 2014). From a life course perspective, the violation of norms has generally been regarded as generating negative consequences because of the prescriptions, proscriptions and sanctions that are associated with norms (Settersten & Mayer, 1997). Obedience to social

norms may however sometime be associated with negative outcomes. Situations in which individuals obey an external normative power that disregards individual benefit for the sake of its own functioning come to mind. A well-known case of this type of situation is reported in Erwin Goffman's work (1968) on adaptation to surveillance institutions such as asylums or prisons, where deviations from institutional norms by inmates were prerequisites of their social and sometimes physical survival. A less extreme case stems from the fact that norms are associated with perceptions of reality that can vary in their degree of accuracy, some being consistent with current social structures and others reminiscent of past or even fantasized social arrangements (Bourdieu & Sayad, 1964; Elias, 2001; Sapin, Spini & Widmer, 2011; Schultz, Tabanico, & Rendon, 2011).

The concept of misleading norms refers to such situations of mismatching between social norms and social structures. Because they are widely inconsistent with the social structures, conformity to misleading norms may in the long run create vulnerability for individuals who conform. Spini and colleagues (Spini et al., 2013; Spini et al., this issue) define vulnerability as a lack of resources that, in specific contexts, puts individuals or groups at major risk of experiencing a time-ordered process that unfolds in three stages: (1) the experience of the negative consequences of stress; (2) followed by an inability to cope effectively with stressors such as critical events; and (3) an inability to recover from stress or to take advantage of opportunities by a given deadline. We will consider those parts of the vulnerabilization process and their relationship with misleading social norms.

Regarding the negative consequences of stress (Spini et al., 2013), life course research has given much attention to the negative consequences of so called "critical events." In the life course literature, the experience of off-time events (teen pregnancy) or critical events (divorce, being fired) is associated with stress (Pearlin & Skaff, 1996). In some

instances, however, the opposite, i.e., conformity to norms, may become a stressor in its own right, such as situations in which internalized social norms prescribe solutions that are dysfunctional in the overall social context or at a given life course phase. Indeed, individuals and groups alike often exhibit *hysteresis* ("looking backward" in Ancient Greek), that is, a profound discrepancy between internalized social norms and the objective conditions of socially framed individual agency. Bourdieu and Sayad (1964) discuss *hysteresis* with reference to the disorientation problems of many Algerian peasants when they had to live in town: even after years of urban living, some individuals could not adapt to their new life context because they continued to refer to social norms and ways of thinking that were located in their past life (Frese, 2011).

There is an intriguing absence of literature that documents the negative outcomes of norm compliance, possibly due to the implicit assumption that normative conformity is approved by society and triggers positive reactions (Popa, Phillips, & Robertson, 2014). By promoting social norms that are no longer aligned with existing social conditions, social contexts may pressure individuals to adopt suboptimal behaviors, practices and life goals. Therefore, some social norms may increase the likelihood that a large number of individuals become vulnerable by making them less able to adjust to life stressors. We will illustrate this first point by referring to several studies that highlight the potential negative consequences of gender norms with respect to actual social constraints and these norms' unexpected impact on individuals in later life stages and transitions.

With regard to vulnerability as an inability to deal effectively with critical events (Spini, Bernardi & Oris, this issue), social norms may make it difficult for individuals to cope with the stress that is generated by critical events by either blinding individuals to non-standard solutions or reinforcing standardized ways of addressing life challenges. Spini and colleagues define vulnerability as an inability to recover from stress or to take

advantage of opportunities by a given deadline (Spini et al., this issue). In some instances, compliance with social norms, for example, when they promote gender inequality, may make it challenging for individuals to create a large and diversified portfolio of assets, regardless of whether they are economic, cultural or relational assets, and promote a functional specialization that prohibits the accumulation of the resources that are necessary to manage constraints and the ability to take advantage of the opportunities that stem from life transitions. Individuals who adhere to socially valued gender norms may become overspecialized and have a higher risk of vulnerabilization, whereas maintaining a large portfolio in social participation is protective (Levy & Bühlmann, 2016) and may be achieved by individuals who do not conform.

Overall, for a social norm to be considered misleading, it must induce people to develop life paths that do not enable them to accumulate a variety of resources which become critical later on in life, when transitions or non-normative events happen. This vulnerability appears later in life in the context of changing personal circumstances (for instance in the event of job loss or divorce). With these considerations in mind, we now sketch a tentative definition of a misleading norm that may be helpful as a sensitizing concept: misleading norms are social norms that are embraced by a population in a given period of time and social context, with negative consequences for a large number of its members at some points in their life course by leading them away from the requirements of social structures. Three dimensions of misleading norms should be stressed. First, their consequences must extend beyond particular cases to become a social fact that has an impact on many lives. Second, the concept of misleading norms assumes a shift or gap in time between the life period of conformity (where individuals actively conform to a norm) and the life period of retribution (where conformist individuals actually demonstrate more vulnerability than those who deviated earlier on from a norm). Finally,

the negative consequences of misleading norms should be attributable to a gap between individual accumulated resources and the requirements of social structures.

Misleading gender norms and life trajectories

We now turn to illustrating the concept of misleading norms by various empirical studies with regard to gender issues. Despite gender convergence since World War II, large gaps remain between men and women across nations for participation in paid work, the attainment of managerial positions and the achievement of high income levels (Altonji & Blank, 1999; Olivetti & Petrongolo, 2014; U.N., 2009). One explanatory factor for such gaps that has been proposed by the literature relates to the enduring impact of gender norms, in particular in the transition to parenthood (Bertrand, 2011; Kaufman & Uhlenberg, 2000; Kluwer, 2010; Sanchez & Thomson, 1997). In many contemporary Western societies, new fathers are expected to become the main breadwinners, and only subsequently to participate in child care and household chores, whereas new mothers are expected to take a major responsibility for the regular care of the infant and family life, and only subsequently for paid work (Krüger & Levy, 2001).

Despite the large interest that has developed in the last four decades in gender inequality in paid work and family responsibility, only a few studies have stressed the potential negative consequences of a gendered normative order for life trajectories in the long term. One exception is the classical book on family sociology *Fortunes et infortunes de la femme mariée*, written by de Singly (1987), which stressed, based on a variety of empirical results, the narrow occupational and intimate path on which women could walk in France after marriage. De Singly indeed emphasized that entering marriage and parenthood meant an orientation towards part-time or home work. Accordingly, married women lost much of their economic power later on in their lives, thus becoming

vulnerable in cases of separation, divorce or widowhood. One major way for divorced or widowed mothers to retrieve a sound level of finance was to marry again, thus reentering the normative model of the nuclear family and its gendered order. In his book *The Incomplete Revolution* (2009), Esping-Andersen also stressed the economic and educational penalties for parents, their children and societies at large of women leaving the labor market or significantly reducing employment when they become parents.

Interestingly, however, there was no specific concept, in either de Singly's or Esping-Andersen's studies, that could qualify the negative consequences that a normative order may have for a large number of individuals when a mismatch develops between such order and the social structures. We believe that such a concept is needed. Several studies suggest that some gender norms regarding the distinctiveness of men and women for the division of child care and paid work become stressors in their own right for a large proportion of a country's population; such norms may stress individuals becoming parents by pushing forward a division of labour that is unfit in the current economic and social environment; they may limit the ability of parents to cope with social stress, and they may decrease their ability to accumulate resources throughout their life courses.

Compared with full-time jobs, part-time jobs are associated with greater uncertainty and job instability, lower wages, fewer opportunities to develop a stable career path, and fewer fringe benefits (Kalleberg, 2000). In most Western countries, women significantly reduce their participation in the labor market when they transition to parenthood, thereby creating paid work instability unknown to their male counterparts (Levy & Widmer, 2013). This normative impetus that compels women to focus on family care as a priority still affects their careers. Indeed there is much evidence that modernity is associated with an increase of non-standard work trajectories and a growing prevalence of part-time and temporary employment for women (for instance, Kalleberg, 2000).

Switzerland is a highly relevant country to study the potential negative effects of gender norms on family and paid work trajectories. Indeed, the country is characterized by the coexistence of gender norms that stress distinct responsibilities for fathers and mothers and heterogeneous family and paid work trajectories, with limited state intervention, thus making individuals highly dependent on either the market or family support for child care (Esping-Andersen, 2009). Several studies that are based on the Swiss Household Panel indicate large differences in the de-standardization trends of occupational careers between women and men (Levy & Widmer, 2013; Widmer & Ritschard, 2009). In recent decades, fathers in Switzerland have maintained fairly stable and linear occupational trajectories, from education and full-time work to retirement. The concept of career as an uninterrupted, upward movement through life with full participation in the labor market is relevant for men in both younger and older worker cohorts. The greater diversification of women's occupational trajectories shows that the de-standardization of these trajectories has affected mothers much more than fathers, thus causing the gender divide, which was overwhelming in the 1960s, to persist in a renewed format. Mothers have been burdened with most of the flexibilization of the economy of Western nations that has occurred since the seventies. Notably, the de-standardization of men's occupational trajectories has mostly concerned the transition from education to paid work and stops at age 30. In comparison, women, especially mothers, in the younger cohorts are placed in increasingly variable working conditions after age 30. In other words, the studies reveal that part-time jobs become permanent in women's occupational trajectories, while such jobs have a transitional status in men's trajectories. In this respect, the de-standardization is reinforced by misleading gender norms, making it a gendered historical process: mothers have experienced a higher level of occupational de-standardization throughout

adulthood because of social norms that incline couples to promote gendered divisions of paid and unpaid work.

Gender norms and the transitions to divorce and remarriage

Separation or divorce is a turning point where the advantages that are associated with conformity to gender norms may turn into disadvantages. The study by Struffolino, Bernardi and Voorpostel (2016) attempted to better understand the interaction between employment trajectories, family structure and health based on a subsample of mothers from the Swiss Household Panel. The study found a reverse association between subjective health and job trajectories for mothers in a stable partnership and those in one-parent households. Mothers in one-parent households were in better health when they worked full-time compared with part-time, whereas the opposite applied to mothers who lived with a partner. Struffolino and colleagues argue that the association between health and paid work for mothers in one-parent households results from the correlation between previous life trajectories and dimensions of the overall social context. They stress that the combination of a gendered organization of job and family, which is strongly supported by social norms, including those that are incorporated in family and social policies, discourages women in Switzerland from being on equal footing with men in the labour market and pushes them to take up the role of secondary earners when they become mothers. According to their results, this pathway is functional in health terms as long as the marriage lasts, as indeed married mothers who work only part-time or not at all show higher subjective health than those who work full-time. However, this pathway turns negative after separation or divorce, as mothers must face new challenges.

Reconsidered from the perspective of misleading norms, the strong normative pressure on women to reduce their participation in the labor market at the transition to parenthood

may be functional in the short term and in the marriage context. However, such part-time trajectories become dysfunctional in the context of divorce. In Western societies that are characterized by a large proportion of marriages that end in divorce, as in the case of Switzerland, such unexpected effects of conforming to social norms of part-time or no participation in the labour market for mothers indeed concerns millions of individuals. Interestingly, although divorce rates are high in many national contexts, culture continues to stress marriage permanence as the only proper way to go, and divorce as a last resort solution (Cherlin, 2009). Because of this normative rejection of divorce, many individuals do not include it as an option in their life planning (Yodanis & Lauer, 2014), and thus undervalue the risk that is associated with a stringent division of paid and family work among them and their partners on the long run.

The effect of misleading norms with regard to divorce was also exemplified in a study by Castren and Widmer (2015). The authors discussed the different ways in which individuals define the boundaries of their family after divorce, increasing or decreasing the impact of this critical event on the conciliation between family and working lives. The extent to which separated and re-partnered mothers and fathers try to maintain family ties that originate from various partnerships differs. Some individuals limit family practices and the recognition of their family to the members of the new household and disregard the significance of previous partners or in-laws. The authors referred to these practices as exclusiveness. Others quite distinctly aim to maintain or even further develop such ties and apply more inclusive family practices. Such inclusivity is relevant as it relates to the extent to which ex-partners maintain active co-parenting practices to the benefit of their children (Favez et al., 2015; Widmer, Favez, & Doan, 2014). Interestingly, mothers who have been homemakers throughout their adult life are much more exclusive in their

definition of family after divorce than others, thus making it difficult for them and their children to adjust family practices to the new set of constraints that stem from divorce and family re-composition.

Misleading gender norms and ageing

The normative expectations with regard to assistance and solidarity in old age are high, as individuals, particularly women, are expected to help their older parents (Perrig-Chiello & Höpflinger, 2005). Alternatively, older parents are expected to care for their grandchildren and provide resources to their children. Overall, a large body of literature shows that family relationships have protective effects on individuals, either directly or by buffering individual stress and, therefore, positively affecting their psychological and physical health (for recent studies, see, for instance, Shor et al., 2013; Thoits, 2011). Family research focuses on the positive dimensions of family relationships that are associated with family solidarity and social capital. However, the social capital that is produced by families constitutes only one dimension of personal networks, as the normativity of family support in conjunction with the relative lack of the corresponding required resources to produce it, trigger various forms of tensions and conflicts (Widmer, 2010; Widmer & Girardin, 2016).

To illustrate the impact of misleading norms on such tensions and conflicts in old age, we use the *Vivre/Leben/Vivere (VLV) study*. The *VLV study* is a large interdisciplinary survey on the life and health conditions of people who are 65 years and older in Switzerland (Ludwig, Cavalli, & Oris, 2014; Oris et al., 2015). The *VLV survey* was conducted in five Swiss provinces, with a total of 3,635 participants who reside in either community dwellings or institutions. The results of this study showed that divorced aging men were overrepresented in situations that are characterized by a lack of either positive

or negative interactions with family members (Girardin & Widmer, 2015). The results also showed that this over-representation was a long-term consequence of social norms that stress the complementarity of men and women for family care and paid work throughout the life course. Due to the normative impetus for men to over-invest in paid work, their connections with their children often depend on their links to their female partner. When such links are severed through divorce or separation, the connections between men and their children often suffer or end (see also Shapiro & Cooney, 2007), with negative consequences for the relational resources that are available to aging men in the long-term.

The *VLV study* also showed that aging women were more likely than men to experience a relational pattern burdened by tension and conflict, as they provide more support to their family members than they receive from them (Widmer & Girardin, 2016). Aging women may feel forced to remain in contact with hostile family members due to strong family obligations that are not met because of a lack of personal resources (poor income, poor health and lack of mobility), notably because they had a higher risk of facing diminishing resources in later life due to widowhood, reduced income, and a decline in functional health, coupled with stronger normative expectations, compared with those of men, to help their family members. Overall, gender norms contribute to the problems that are associated with transitions in later life. Such norms cause women to accumulate disadvantages in terms of economic resources over the life course that are related to their lower position in the job market while burdening them with the majority share of care work (see Moen, 1996; Arber, Davidson & Ginn, 2003; Dannefer, 2003; Willson et al., 2006).

The reproduction of misleading norms: influences of personal networks and normative climates

The previous sections stressed the consequences of misleading gender norms for individuals over the life course. We now turn to the reproduction of such norms over time and generations. There are many reasons for which gender norms come into existence, one of which is their endorsement and reinforcement by powerful social groups or institutions (Becker, 2008; Elias, 1982). Active mechanisms of reproduction of misleading norms are at play, referring to multilevel dimensions of vulnerability. Among a variety of candidates, we point to two levels of the reproduction of misleading norms: personal networks and normative climates.

The longitudinal study *Becoming parents* (Le Goff & Levy, 2016) provided evidence that the density of personal networks, measured before the birth of a child, significantly shapes the participation of individuals in paid work during the transition to parenthood (Giudici & Widmer, 2015). Dense personal networks are composed of highly interconnected individuals, specifically individuals who know and possibly interact with each other regularly. The previous research highlighted the strong normative influence that such highly connected networks may have because network members can band together to enforce norms (Bott, 1971; Milardo & Allan, 2000). The results of the study by Giudici and Widmer (2015) showed that women in a personal network with a high density of emotional support experienced a larger reduction in their rate of participation in paid work during this transition. Men in a personal network with a high density of practical support were less likely than other men to reduce their occupational rate. For women, a dense emotional support network was also associated with intentions that are expressed before the transition to reduce their occupational rates.

As discussed above, the gendered master statuses of men and women in Switzerland (Krüger & Levy, 2001), as in many other European countries, urges men to place a priority on paid work while they invest their remaining time in child care. This social norm is even more greatly felt when men are embedded in highly interconnected support networks. In contrast, women feel a stronger pressure than that felt by men to fulfil the role of a "less-working" parent, especially when they have a strongly interconnected emotional support network. A striking result was that independent of their initial intentions, couples with dense networks adopted a more gendered division of paid labor and thus developed conservative models of family relationships, despite their preference for alternative models (Giudici & Widmer, 2015). One mechanism that accounts for this conservative effect of dense personal networks is associated with norm reinforcement. Social control is more efficient within such networks, as members exercise a joint and coherent pressure to adopt socially dominant normative models (Bott, 1971; Coleman, 1988).

The current dominant model in Switzerland indeed states that infants require mothers to stay at home and that men must assume the primary responsibility for paid work in nuclear families (Krüger & Levy, 2001; Levy & Widmer, 2013). The norms that underpin this model are diffused through interconnected conservative influences from parents, grandparents, uncles and aunts. In fact, individuals in dense networks less often exhibit innovative and alternative models of the division of labor (Rogers, 1995). Notably, the transition to parenthood is associated with an increased presence of kin from older generations compared with friends within personal networks (Sapin & Widmer, 2016).

The results of that particular study highlight the fact that personal networks may explain, at least in part, why social norms that provide poor life chances may be

reproduced across generations. Indeed, the generation of parents of the individuals who are transitioning to parenthood in the early 21th century experienced in their young and middle adulthood a period of economic expansion and wealthy society following World War II. This historical time made the employment of one family member per household sufficient to pay for family expenses, while divorce rates were extremely low (Sapin, Spini & Widmer, 2011). In that specific historical situation, developing a gendered division of labor did not involve strong penalties for couples, and they may even have been financially optimal (Becker, 1981). The parents of individuals who are currently entering into the transition to parenthood experienced in their young adulthood a set of social conditions that are at strong variance with those to which the generation of their children is exposed. Misleading norms are produced or reproduced by the mismatch between actual social constraints, as experienced by cohorts of young adults entering parenthood, and the normative influence of their parents (Witt, 1997), who lived this transition under a different set of constraints. One may hypothesize that each generation promotes a set of norms that is associated with its historical experience that constitute, to a large extent, its definition of reality, which they then deliver at various transition points to their adult children (Bourdieu & Sayad, 1964).

In their research on attitudes towards non-traditional gender behaviors (notably paid work that is undertaken by women with infants or toddlers) across Europe, the study by Eicher et al. (2015) revealed that gender attitudes, which are usually conceptualized at the individual level, are anchored in norms at various levels, which are articulated by normative climates. This research showed that normative climates as collective realities that supersede individual preferences and values vary across Europe. It indicates that social norms are developed concomitantly by individuals and social groups and

reinforced by social interactions and institutions (see Spini, Bernardi & Oris, this issue). In liberal welfare states such as the UK and in so-called conservative welfare states such as Austria and Germany, normative climates emphasize that mothers, but not fathers, should stop working full-time to care for their young children (Eicher et al., 2015). This is not the case of other European countries. Thus individuals face different normative climates depending of the country they live in, and the same behavior will be accepted or stigmatized depending on these climates.

Another set of empirical evidence of these macro-influences on the possible mismatch between norms and behaviors is presented in the study by Bühlmann, Elcheroth, & Tettamanti (2009). The results of that study indicated that while a majority couples across Europe live in coherent egalitarian configurations of values and practices in their pre-parental phase, they shift to a situation of tension between egalitarian values and gendered practices following the births of their first child, with the magnitude of this shift being strongly moderated by welfare regimes. In liberal regimes, the tension between values and practices was found to be transformed into an enduring accommodation to inequality, whereas in social-democratic regimes, change to unequal practices was found to be less prominent and more reversible. Overall, those two studies show that misleading norms are produced and reproduced by collective influences that extend well beyond individual preferences.

Discussion

This paper had three main purposes. It first aimed to contribute a theoretical alternative to research stressing the unequivocal negative consequences of deviance for life trajectories, by proposing and defining the concept of misleading norm. Second, it wanted to illustrate its usefulness by reviewing various studies that are drawn from the Swiss National Centre of Competence in Research LIVES (www.lives-nccr.ch) with regard to how such norms

increase vulnerability at three different stages of the life course —the transition to parenthood, divorce, and family interactions in later life. Finally, this paper stressed two levels of influence to account for the reproduction of misleading norms, personal networks and normative climates.

We now return to our initial project and summarize the main lessons that may be learned from our endeavor. It is often assumed that sound individual development is secured when the roles that are linked with social norms are fulfilled by individuals in due time. The various examples that we provided showed that some gender norms, which we labelled misleading, increase the vulnerability of individuals later on in their life course. Scholars have stressed the penalties that are associated with gender inequalities for societies (for example, Esping-Andersen, 2009), but the inherent social damage that is associated with a mismatch between social norms and actual social structures, when individual life courses are considered across time in a dynamic perspective, has thus far not been positioned at the forefront of research. This article reviewed the research that suggests that gender norms may be misleading in the current social contexts of many Western countries, as such norms are based on an outdated view of social structures. More specifically, these gender norms poorly anticipate the adaptability that is required of both men and women by individualized societies, specifically with respect to the multidimensionality of life paths, individual autonomy and the individualization of life trajectories, in both family and paid work dimensions (Beck, 2009; Elias, 2001; Kohli, 2007; Sapin, Spini, & Widmer, 2011).

Conformity to gender norms is counter-productive for life course development in highly individualized societies, particularly for women in the labor market and for men in family interactions. In many countries, fathers are expected to be overly active in the job market, while mothers are expected to give priority to taking care of family work (Treas &

Widmer, 2000). A balanced investment in the two life spheres may be more beneficial for both parents. To a large extent, men are misled by the norms that stress paid work. Alternatively, couples who fulfill gendered expectations regarding family responsibilities increase the probability that mothers will develop disrupted work careers that may result in negative consequences in later life in cases of separation and divorce and the ensuing demand for financial self-sufficiency and care work. Mothers who conform to gender norms concerning child care appear to suffer more when their children leave home, which robs them of their master status, as another study shows (Freund, Knecht, & Wiese, 2014).

Returning to the definition of vulnerability, we observed that compliance with some gender norms renders individuals vulnerable by disabling their ability to accumulate resources, whether professional or relational, due to the process of specialization. Normative compliance may also make individuals less able to adjust to turning points and critical events such as divorce, job loss or prolonged unemployment. To help individuals to adapt to such life changes, alternative norms that stress the development of a larger set of resources and competences throughout the life course for both men and women must be promoted.

As important influences on individual lives, the content of social norms should be estimated in relation to current and expectable social constrains in which individuals are embedded in their life course. Indeed, gender norms may be functional on the short run for individuals, but misleading on the long run or when individuals face non-normative events or turning points. They provide guidelines to individuals who are highly institutionalized in the organization of many countries and prompt fathers and mothers to unequally invest their time, skills and energy into paid and family work. These guidelines may or may not respond to the structural constraints of their national contexts (i.e., their

job markets and demographics). Hence, the consideration of the overall structural features of each national context and, notably, each welfare state (Esping-Andersen, 2009) is necessary to discern which norms are misleading.

Beyond the issue of gender, assessing the misleading content of some social norms may help researchers to understand why vulnerability sometimes appears in so-called "normal" life trajectories. Trajectories that deviate from such norms may paradoxically represent innovative ways of living that are more adapted to existing or to forthcoming social and economic constraints. In most cases, new parents will shift towards a gendered division of paid work and household labor, which, in a context such as Switzerland, causes them to be responsive to the expectations of their family networks and the overall normative climate of the country. Although such conformity makes their social adjustment to parenthood easier in the short term by providing, for instance, stronger integration in their personal networks, it triggers negative consequences in their life course in the long term. Note that situation 1 is counterfactually interesting, as it explains to some extent why a large number of individuals stick to misleading norms, beyond explanations that stress sensitivity to social desirability or conformity as an internalized habitus. Indeed, in the short term or in life courses that are characterized by stability and an absence of critical events, conformity to such norms is rewarded.

However, other individuals may decline to conform to misleading norms. There is a long-standing interest in sociology for the varied forms and meanings of deviance (Merton, 1957). This tradition stresses that certain individuals, whom Robert Merton called "innovators," while seeking to achieve the most central values of their society, may in adverse circumstances choose to violate social norms. The relationship between norms and vulnerability across the life course is indeed dynamic. This paper provides some insight into this relationship by proposing that gender norms regarding child care are

misleading in many Western nations. In such cases, conformity, although productive in the short-term for individuals and under "normal circumstances," becomes a burden for many in later life stages and when life circumstances change, while deviance becomes a factor of resilience. Some individuals, who are less sensitive to their personal networks and the overall normative climate of their country, may be able to deviate from misleading norms while they carry the costs of such deviance.

Misleading norms have consequences for individual adaptation in relation to historical changes (Elder, 1978; Elias, 1982; Moscovici, 1976), as they may be termed misleading only in reference to a particular social context. Such changes are reflected by intergenerational or inter-cohort differences. For instance, in the three decades that separate the end of World War II and the oil crisis of 1973, the so called "Thirty Glorious ," a fully gendered and standardized model of family and occupational trajectories, came to the forefront of Western societies (Kohli, 2007). Although this model has been shattered by the changing structures of the global economy since then, its normative constraints with regard to gender have remained strong, creating potential maladjustments for younger cohorts who must live under new economic circumstances while still being under an older normative order (Sapin, Spini, & Widmer, 2011).

Do we actually need the concept of misleading norms to describe the type of mismatch between social norms and social structures and their consequences for individual life trajectories that we exemplified with gender norms? We believe the answer is yes. First, it is the role of the social sciences, particularly of the life course research, to stress the potential risks that are associated with conformity to some social norms for individual development, including gender norms, by highlighting that they contribute to processes of vulnerabilization of individual lives in the long term. They do so by hindering the accumulation of resources, by increasing the difficulty to cope with specific critical

events and by making the recovery after critical events more painful. It is this set of dimensions that is encapsulated in the concept of misleading norm. Second, with a specific concept to describe such a mismatch between dominant and stable norms and evolving social structures, the generalization of a variety of research results with regard to ambiguity of normative conformity for individual lives may be more easily achieved. Finally, the concept of misleading norms, we believe, makes it easier to stress to policy makers the practical implications of such a mismatch.

We now return to our tentative definition of the sensitizing concept of misleading norms, as "social norms that are embraced by a population in a given period of time and social context, with negative consequences for a large number of individuals at some points in their life course." The empirical studies that we chose to stress present cases in which the negative consequences of gender norms embrace large chunks of a population and thus include the dimension of being a social fact. In other words, the norms that we considered are misleading for many, if not a majority, of individuals. In all of the case studies that are considered in this article, there is a gap in the time between the life period of conformity (during which individuals actively conform to a norm) and the life period of retribution. A life course perspective and methodology are therefore most appropriate to study misleading norms as such perspective and methods are designed to study changes and stability in life trajectories.

Our tentative formulation of the concept of misleading norms proves to have heuristic value as it may provide a better understanding of life dimensions other than those that relate to gender. The literature stresses, for instance, the functionality of disengagement in situations in which the pursuit of a goal may increase vulnerability, notably when demands exceed individual resources or when valued norms thwart adaptation. Hall and colleagues (2010), for example, showed that goal engagement was related to survival for

individuals who suffered from acute conditions but to poorer physical health for individuals who had chronic conditions. Conversely, goal disengagement predicted poorer health conditions for individuals who suffered from an acute health episode, but it improved health for individuals who suffered from chronic conditions. Tomasik and Silbereisen (2012) demonstrated the beneficial effect of disengaging from career planning in a historical context with unfavorable economic conditions. These results show that dominant social norms that stress control and personal responsibility (Bandura, 1997; Heckhausen & Schulz, 1995) may become misleading for a large number of individuals who are confronted with stress that is related to uncertainty or social constraints that drastically diminish the chances of success by goal-directed persistence.

However, the generalization of the concept of misleading norms should cautiously consider some critical issues. First, misleading norms should not be confused with closely related yet, nevertheless, distinct classical notions such as the concepts of anomy (Durkheim, 1957), norm conflict or sociological ambivalence (Merton, 1957). Such notions apply to situations in which individuals are torn between strong contradictory normative influences that promote distinct life decisions and pathways. For instance, ambivalence was defined as an oscillation of individuals between contradictory social norms (Pillemer & Lüscher, 2004). Some individuals may be torn between strong feelings of obligation to support their aging parents and caring for their children and heavy social pressure towards investing in a career, two challenging options that are likely impossible to reconcile. In such cases, the outcomes of norms for behaviors and life courses is more unstable, as the contradictions that are generated by opposite normative influences may either engender confusion and misunderstanding regarding acceptable ways to develop one's life course or overwhelm the individual with tasks that require completion or, as an alternative, creating a larger space for individual agency. By

contrast, the concept of misleading norms refers to a situation in which there is a shared view or expectation at the societal or institutional level concerning the proper way to make some key decisions about the life course, with few, weak or no contradictory norms present. In other words, for social norms to be misleading, they must be widespread, strong and, to some extent, institutionalized, with at most few existing normative alternatives. Finally, as the proposed examples show, social norms are never misleading per se, as it is their contradictions to the current state of the social structures that cause them to be maladjusted while individuals carry the burden of their negative consequences throughout their lives.

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