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Life-Course Management and Social Security in Later Life: Women's Biographical Practices Spanning Generations and Historical Contexts in Tajikistan

Swetlana Torno*

Abstract: »Lebensverlaufsmanagement und soziale Sicherheit im späteren Leben: Biografische Praktiken von Frauen über Generationen und historische Kontexte hinweg in Tadschikistan«. The qualitative and quantitative study of life courses represents an important branch of sociological research and is an interesting case for Global Sociology. While characterized by thematic and methodological diversity, this wide research field has rarely looked beyond the countries of the Global North, and most of its key concepts were formulated based on studies in the Euro-American context. Taking an ethnographic research project on women's life courses in Tajikistan as its starting point, this paper examines how analytical concepts associated with the life-course paradigm can travel transnationally and asks what we can learn from transposing these concepts to a non-European setting. More specifically, it brings concepts such as *linked lives* and the intersection of *individual*, *family*, and *historical time* into conversation with empirical data collected through the genealogical method, biographical interviews, and participant observation. This paper focuses on women's life-course practices to secure care in later life in post-independence Tajikistan and advances the argument that women in advanced ages become central actors in safeguarding family livelihoods and old-age care by carefully shaping their own life trajectories and managing their children's.

Keywords: Global Sociology, genealogical method, linked lives, life-course management, care, women, Tajikistan.

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1. Introduction

One warm summer evening in 2014, I joined Gulbahor¹ at a table placed in the courtyard of her house situated in a village not far from Kulob city.² I met the 55-year-old woman shortly after the start of my fieldwork in Tajikistan in November 2013. Since then, I have become a regular guest in her home, where she lived together with her husband, children, and niece. This summer evening, Gulbahor was finishing calculations related to her work, while I sat down to write notes in my fieldwork diary. Making use of the joint working space, I occasionally dropped questions to clarify research-related issues when at one point our conversation turned to Gulbahor's pension. It turned out that she was looking forward to retiring but was worrying about the distribution of her family's income and how this might affect her daughters' future lifepaths. In my fieldwork diary, I noted the following:

Gulbahor points out that she is officially eligible to retire, but she and her husband have two daughters who are currently going to school and wish to take up studies later. "My husband's salary won't be enough. Umed [her son] is not yet ready to contribute to the household income, and his wife will give birth soon." The family will clearly feel the shortfall of her salary, although they grow some vegetables and keep animals. On the other hand, she is very tired and often complains of pain in her back and legs. Her full-time job and family responsibilities are obviously a burden for her. She recalls that her parents-in-law used to work a lot on their plot keeping cows, goats and a garden. Back then, Gulbahor and her husband were able to pursue their careers and devote time to their children's education, while the in-laws took care of the household.

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Elaborating upon her ability to retire, Gulbahor reflected on the consequences of such a decision for the life trajectories of other family members. From her reflections we learn that going on a pension would put a strain on her husband and son to generate higher income and might jeopardize her youngest daughters' transition to university if they fail to do so. Gulbahor framed her family as a unit of mutual support and thought of the life trajectories of family members as interconnected in such a way that decisions regarding the lifepath of one family member could impact the lifepaths of others.

Back in Germany, I discovered that the relations of dependence outlined by Gulbahor with respect to the life trajectories of her family members are

¹ All names are pseudonyms. Unless otherwise stated, all references to age correspond to the interlocutor's age at the time of my fieldwork in Tajikistan in 2013–2014.

² Resembling a provincial town more than a vibrant urban center, Kulob is Tajikistan's fourth largest city and had around 100,000 inhabitants in January 2014. It is located in a wide river valley in the south of the Khatlon province, about 200 km from the capital, Dushanbe, and 55 km from the Tajik-Afghan border.

nothing new to the so-called “life course paradigm” (Elder 1994). At that time, I was working on an anthropological research project to explore the impacts of the post-Soviet transformation processes and male labour migration on women’s life courses and future-making practices in Tajikistan. While analysing my ethnographic material, I found it helpful to think with concepts such as *linked lives* and the intersection of *individual, family, and historical time* that originated in North American life-course research. Empirical observations such as the conversation with Gulbahor indicated that these notions can be a fruitful tool for describing the relations and practices I encountered in Tajikistan. However, borrowing these concepts for my study was not straightforward. Rather, they had to be reimagined in the socio-political space of Tajikistan, as well as expanded in order to do justice to different economic, cultural, and historical contexts.

The analytical movements I made in my research project, from fieldwork and preliminary data analysis to the selection of relevant analytical concepts and their re-evaluation in the light of my observations in Tajikistan, are relevant to the project to globalize sociology. In this case, life-course studies represent an interesting terrain to explore. Although characterized by a wide thematic, methodological, and disciplinary diversity, this research field has rarely looked beyond the countries of the Global North. Its key concepts were therefore formulated based on studies conducted in West European and North American contexts.

The Global Sociology project emerged in the wake of postcolonial critique and rising awareness about inequalities in knowledge production around the globe. Arising out of literary studies, and spreading across the humanities and social sciences, the postcolonial/decolonial lens denounced the privileging of theories, debates, and concepts of Western origin that claimed explanatory power for phenomena observed not only within their own geographical orbit, but also far away from the affluent Euro-American metropolises. Certainly, different disciplines moved (and continue to do so) at their own pace towards reassessing, provincializing, and decolonizing their foundational assumptions and analytical vocabulary, depending on their object of study, disciplinary history, and entanglements with the colonial past (Bhambra 2011; Mills 2022). Within sociology, the debate tended to centre around the question of the universality and particularity of sociological concepts, as well as the call for epistemological plurality (Kislenko 2021). More recently, the focus has shifted towards identifying topics of global concern that might unite different national sociologies (e.g., authoritarianism, global inequalities, global civil society, post-secular society, etc.) and the methodological challenges of doing Global Sociology (Burawoy 2015; Go 2016; Hanafi 2020).

Taking an ethnographic research project on women’s life courses in Tajikistan as its starting point, this paper examines how analytical concepts associated with the life-course paradigm can travel transnationally and which

perspectives emerge on this journey. More specifically, it asks: What can we learn from reading concepts developed in the Euro-American metropolises alongside empirical material collected at the periphery of the former Soviet empire? And how do insights gained from research in Tajikistan change the way these concepts are interpreted and implemented?

My contribution builds on the work of Gurminder K. Bhambra and Julian Go in particular, whose attempts to globalize sociological knowledge production resonate well with anthropological research practice. Bhambra puts forward a historically and locally grounded approach called “connected sociologies” that revisits global connections formed during colonial expansion with the aim of “reconstruct[ing] theoretical categories” from this position (Bhambra 2014, 4). The end result should be not a “simple pluralism” (ibid., 5) of categories, but a transformed understanding of these categories and processes that lead to their formation. In a similar vein, this article examines what perspectives on the life course emerge if we begin the enquiry with Gulbahor’s example and revise life-course concepts in the light of empirical material from Tajikistan, a place with a particular local history and global embeddedness. I will show that, with advanced age, women become central actors in safeguarding family livelihoods and old-age care by carefully shaping their own and arranging their children’s life trajectories. These life-course management practices and future-making strategies span over the life course across generations and react to changing socio-political contexts.

Alongside theorizing women’s life-course practices, this article proposes to combine biographical interviews with the systematic collection of genealogical data and immersive research praxis. Combining the former two methods allows biographical decisions to be examined in the light of wider family dynamics, while the latter helps to better contemplate the logics of local lifeworlds that inform people’s decision-making. In anthropology, this orientation is called the *emic perspective* and is similar to what Go (2016) terms the “Southern standpoint.” I will return to this approach below. Here, I would like to point out that in his writings Go mostly builds on subaltern scholars such as Frantz Fanon, W.E.B. DuBois, and Laura Kellogg, that is, globally marginalized yet relatively privileged voices within their own societies (see Go 2016, 2023). In contrast, my article foregrounds the perspectives of the lower middle classes and women in present-day Tajikistan.

The paper is organized as follows. I start by introducing the life-course paradigm and outlining its limitations from the point of view of Global Sociology. This is followed in Section 3 by a discussion of anthropological methodology and how it facilitates moving towards the emic perspective. An elaboration of the historical, social, and cultural settings that are necessary to understand Gulbahor’s retirement plans is provided in Section 4. In Sections 5 and 6, I delve into Gulbahor’s life trajectory to explore how she managed her fertility and her children’s life trajectories under changing socio-political and

economic conditions. The paper concludes with a general discussion of the insights empirical material from Tajikistan offers to life-course concepts and which methodological strategies researchers can adopt to accommodate positions from the global margins.

The perspectives I am offering here are influenced by my professional and personal trajectory as an anthropologist with a mixed Russian-German background, who carries the baggage and advantages of these identities while doing research. Born in Russia, I received most of my educational training in Germany and currently work at a German research institution with access to a generous research infrastructure and funding. Conducting fieldwork in Tajikistan, my identity is in a constant flux and adapts to the contexts in which I find myself. I use the Tajik language in day-to-day life and for most interviews but can capitalize on my Russian language skills and my family's migration history to Europe in situations when this facilitates the interaction with particular groups of people.

2. Revisiting the Life-Course Paradigm

Life-course studies are a wide field of research that covers a great variety of topics and adopts qualitative and quantitative approaches. At the core of this interdisciplinary scholarship lies the quest “to discover *how* and *why* human lives unfold as they do,” as Deborah Carr (2009, XI, original emphasis) puts it. Despite its thematic and methodological diversity, it builds upon a set of core concepts that were best spelled out by the sociologist Glen H. Elder Jr. in what became known as the *life-course paradigm* (Elder 1994; Elder, Kirkpatrick Johnson, and Crosnoe 2004; Marshall and Mueller 2003). Reviewing three decades of life-course research, Elder mapped out five principles that, until today, inform the study of individual lives alongside those of age cohorts, generations, and specific social groups. Below, I briefly summarize this theoretical framework.

Rejecting earlier assumptions about childhood and adolescence as the person's formative years, the *principle of life-long development* argues that individuals experience fundamental biological, psychological, and social changes over the whole life-span and that major turning points can still occur in later life (Elder, Kirkpatrick Johnson, and Crosnoe 2004, 11; Marshall and Mueller 2003, 5). The *principle of timing* addresses the inner organization of life courses, that is, the sequencing of events, transitions, and social roles as well as their implications for developments later in life (Elder, Kirkpatrick Johnson, and Crosnoe 2004, 12-3). This perspective goes back to the work of Berenice Neugarten, who studied normative ideas about age in the USA and showed that people can perceive the timing in their lives as being in or out of

synch with socially or institutionally defined clocks (Neugarten, Moore, and Lowe 1965).

The life courses of individuals are profoundly shaped by the *historical time and places* they experience over their lifetime. Being born in a specific geographical location and in a particular historical period influences which (normative) biographical clocks guide people's decision-making, what type of opportunities are available to them, and how they evaluate particular transitions. In addition, the impact of historical events, such as wars, economic crises, technological revolutions, and other social shifts, differ depending on whether individuals experience them as children, adults or in later life, as members of a particular social class, gender, or ethnic group, and in different places, starting from city neighbourhoods and ending with nation states and whole continents (Carr 2009, XIV; Elder, Kirkpatrick Johnson, and Crosnoe 2004, 12). The *principle of linked lives* draws attention to the cross-cutting links in the life courses of family members, friends, partners, co-workers, and others. It stresses that biographical events propagate across individual lives and shape the life trajectories of those who are socially connected in manifold ways (Elder, Kirkpatrick Johnson, and Crosnoe 2004, 13-4). Lastly, the *principle of agency* asserts that individuals are not passively acted upon by social and structural forces, but rather "construct their own life course through the choices and actions they take within the opportunities and constraints of history and social circumstances" (ibid., 11).

Viewed from the perspective of postcolonial critique and Global Sociology, the concepts that were formulated within the life-course paradigm can be called "Eurocentric" and "particularist," as well as promoting a rather linear historical narrative (Bhambra 2014; Chakrabarty 2000; Kislenko 2021; Tlostanova 2015). Most of them were formulated by scholars based at institutions in Western Europe and the USA who sought to document the changes individuals, families, and age cohorts have been experiencing in the context of Euro-American modernization (see Marshall and Mueller 2003).³ A look at the topics addressed by the life-course literature clearly reflects the problems and preoccupations that emerged in these societies during their historical trajectories. Among many others, they include changes in the life-course structure during industrialization and de-industrialization (e.g., Hareven 1999), the standardizing effects of nation states and welfare institutions on lifepaths (e.g., Kohli 1985), and educational and professional pathways and resilience in the context of economic crises (e.g., Elder 1974) as well as the causes and

³ It is interesting to note that earlier writings, such as Leonard Cain's "The sociology of ageing" (1959), make use of anthropological theorizations of life stages and age-structuring in non-European societies. These perspectives were obscured by the substantial advances in life-course research of the 1960s and 1970s, while anthropologists found themselves in the position of an ancillary discipline providing "exotic data" for sketchy international comparisons (Keith and Kertzer 1984, 19).

consequences of juvenile delinquency and teenage pregnancies on the subsequent life trajectories of individuals and their children (see Crosnoe 2009). In addition, longitudinal life-course studies have been launched in most countries of the Global North, whereas attempts to operationalize the concepts of the life-course paradigm outside the Euro-American sphere remain rather small (see Gebel et al. 2019 and publications of TEW-CCA Project; Titma and Roots 2006; Zhou and Hou 1999).

Given this focus and historical baggage, it is legitimate to ask whether the concepts of the life course paradigm can be applied in other parts of the world. I argue that they can. One reason for this is that, handled appropriately, they are fairly abstract and historical and cross-cultural variation. Moreover, concepts such as linked lives and individual agency speak to many anthropologists for their stress on kinship ties and the capacity of individuals to navigate through even constraining situations (see e.g., Alber 2016; Gamburd 2021; Johnson-Hanks 2002). Also, qualitative biographical research in non-European contexts, such as Arne Worm's (2020) study of Syrian refugees, has revealed the importance of intergenerational links and large family networks in shaping migration decisions and life trajectories. What is decisive is not that the biographies of different individuals are interdependent, but rather how researchers establish connections between individual lifepaths and what type of relations these connections entail (e.g., hierarchy, reciprocity, care obligations, etc.). In other words, when using the concepts of the life-course paradigm, they need to be reimagined in other contexts and through the logics of other social worlds.

In my research project on women's life courses in Tajikistan, I found it particularly useful to think with Tamara Hareven's notion of the intersections of individual, family, and historical time (Hareven 1977, 1999). Hareven is a historian who studied the interactions of working-class families in the late 19th century USA amidst processes of rapid social and economic change, mainly industrialization and urbanization. She argued that individual lifepaths, family life, and historical developments need to be understood as intertwined processes, and she showed how these levels require constant fine-tuning in everyday life (Hareven 1977, 5). I will come back to Hareven's ideas when unravelling Gulbahor's case study and my ethnographic material below.

3. Moving Towards the "Southern Standpoint": Doing Ethnography

Julian Go argued that one way of doing Global Sociology is to take the Southern standpoint. He described this scholarly orientation as a "strategy [that] begins by attending to the concerns, categories, experiences and practices of

subaltern subjects at the bottom of global hierarchies. This is a social science from below; a sociology that starts not with the standpoint of the metropole but the standpoint of subjugated groups” (Go 2016, 2). What he calls the Southern standpoint resonates with an anthropological approach to her subject and object of study, in short, doing ethnography. The parallel between Go and anthropological research practice I am identifying here is an analytical move and strategic researcher orientation. Making this comparison, I do not intend to suggest that anthropologists conduct research exclusively or mainly in countries of the Global South. In the following, I set out the details concerning my research in Tajikistan and discuss how ethnographic methods facilitate moving closer to the local point of view.

Larger parts of the material presented here were collected during two research trips to Tajikistan, from November 2013 to September 2014, and again in April 2016, totalling eleven months. This fieldwork took place in the Kulob region of southern Tajikistan, with occasional trips to the capital, Dushanbe, and other parts of the county. Furthermore, the study profited from insights gained during earlier visits to Tajikistan, in spring and autumn 2012 (six weeks each), with the purpose of studying the Tajik language and working for an international developmental organization. In autumn 2022, I returned to Tajikistan in the framework of a new research project and revisited several earlier interlocutors, among them Gulbahor. I include updates about her family where it seems necessary for this article.

During fieldwork, I used three instruments of data collection that complemented each other in the sense that they provided information on people’s daily lives, the evolution of life trajectories, and the institutional, economic, and political contexts. These methods are participant observation, biographical interviews alongside the genealogical method, open thematic interviews, audio-visual recordings, and review of legal texts and local online and print media. Mixing not only different methodologies, but also different types of material has been a common ethnographic practice for several decades that enables social worlds to be studied in all their complexity (Gupta and Ferguson 1997, 37). Below, I elaborate on participant observation, biographical interviews, and the genealogical method as particularly relevant for this article.

Participant observation is considered by many to be the key tool of anthropological research (Amit 1999; Gupta and Ferguson 1997). It is characterized by a proximity to the everyday life of research participants and flexibility in orienting the research towards topics that arise out of daily interactions. This approach offers the advantage of exploring *emic concepts* from the interlocutors’ point of view and observing processes that are difficult to put into words (Spittler 2001). A key area of participant observation in my research were families. More precisely, this means that I lived with two families in Kulob that differed in their composition, housing situation, and socio-economic background. I spent several days a week in each household and got to know

their relatives from near and far. Living in these households also helped me to establish contacts with other families in the neighbourhood. Gradually over time, my interactions expanded to people and families from Kulob, whom I met through state institutions and a women's rights NGO, as well as in the city park or at the market. Visiting them regularly and keeping up interactions over a long period of time helped me develop a nuanced understanding of everyday family life, people's aspirations, and concerns for the future.

The second methodological tool consisted of semi-structured biographical interviews and systematic records of genealogies that I conducted with women of different ages. The biographical interviews were guided by Arnold van Gennep's ([1909] 2005) life-cycle model, which divides life into stages and looks in particular at the transitions between them (often rituals). Each interview proceeded chronologically from birth to the present day, obtaining information on the interlocutor's place of birth, phases of schooling, study and employment, circumstances of marriage (as well as potential divorces), the number of children, possible changes of residence, the establishment of their own household, information about retirement, and eldercare practices. At the outset, I encouraged my interlocutors to talk freely about their lives and deepened their narratives with further questions (e.g., when, how, and why certain decisions were made). Between 2013 and 2014, I conducted a total of 25 biographical interviews with women aged between 18 and 93. The interviews lasted between one and two hours. They were all tape-recorded and partly transcribed at a later stage.

I usually combined biographical interviews with the recording of genealogies, the second systematic research method in my study. The topic of kinship has preoccupied the discipline of anthropology practically since its inception, resulting in the development of a common system for presenting family relations diagrammatically across cultures (see, e.g., Fischer 1996). Nowadays the method is less common than it used to be due to the discipline's orientation towards other research topics and the proliferation of constructivist approaches to kinship. I employed the genealogical method in the context of a comparative demographic study of family dynamics among Tajik-speaking groups in Central Asia, conducted with colleagues at Heidelberg University. Each of us collected genealogies according to previously discussed parameters that were later transformed into a demographic dataset and analysed in a research paper (Roche, Torno, and Kazemi 2020).

The genealogy of Gulbahor's husband in Figure 1 (in section 5) is representative of a genealogy compiled during two interview sessions that lasted between one and two hours each. Genealogies are usually recorded from the perspective of an ego (the interlocutor). For the purposes of our demographic study, we recorded all the people an individual considered themselves related to and remembered through their parents, siblings, and spouses. For each

person in the genealogical chart, we recorded the year of birth, marriage, and, if applicable, divorce and death – in other words, key life-course data. I conducted a total of 19 genealogical interviews, two of them with men. My interlocutors were between 30 and 60 years old. All interviews took place in 2014 and were tape-recorded.

When conducting genealogical interviews, I usually explored the lifepaths of the parents, siblings, and children of my interlocutors and tried to obtain as much detailed biographical information as possible. As a result, I gathered life histories of up to three generations for further analysis. On the one hand, these data allowed conclusions about the changes in life trajectories of different generations. On the other hand, this procedure enabled me to look at the interactions between the life courses of family members within one generation (siblings), as well as between different generations (parents and children). From an analytical perspective, the first instance speaks to differences between age cohorts, whereas the second connects to the concept of linked lives. On a more general level, integrating standardized genealogical data with insights from participant observation allows the researcher to grasp the dynamics and complexity of the social worlds in which individuals and families forge ahead their lives, as well as learning about interlocutors' dreams, goals, and concerns from their own perspectives.

4. Gulbahor's Retirement Plans and the Logics of Local Social Worlds

Coming back to Gulbahor's case, let me elaborate on the historical, social, and cultural settings that are necessary to understand her future-making strategies and life-course practices. Gulbahor's worries about the family's livelihood, her retirement plans, and the future prospects of her youngest daughters are framed by a particular place and time. The geographical space that today we call the Republic of Tajikistan was colonized by the Russian Empire at the end of the 19th century and later became part of the Soviet Union. In both cases, changes in governance entailed military actions and the subordination of local populations. Prior to the creation of the Tajik Soviet Socialist Republic (Tajik SSR) in 1929, no such country as Tajikistan existed in Central Asia. The Bolsheviks profoundly altered not only the region's political borders, but also the social and economic life of the (mainly) Muslim populations inhabiting the territory along the Silk Roads. They collectivized the land, changed methods of agricultural production, transformed local governance structures, introduced new industries, launched campaigns for women's emancipation, and established a comprehensive system of social security, which included compulsory schooling until the age of 16, free medical care,

and old-age pensions for those aged 55 (women) and 60 (men). In short, during Soviet rule, the mechanics of social life and parameters shaping people's lifepaths changed profoundly, making them more regular and predictable in a similar way as the "institutionalized life course" of the post-WWII era in Western Europe (Kohli 1985).

The dissolution of the USSR in 1991 meant the appearance of a new state on the world map as well as many challenges to its population. Shortly after independence, a civil war broke out in the country that lasted from 1992 to 1997, caused between 40,000 and 100,000 deaths, and displaced about a million people (Epkenhans 2016, 2). The war destroyed many parts of the infrastructure, impoverished large sections of the population, and led to girls' dropping early out of school and a reduced age at marriage, which in some parts of the country could be observed even a decade after the official end of the conflict (Roche, Torno, and Kazemi 2020; Shemyakina 2007, 101-16). Due to the deep and continuous economic crisis that followed independence, labour migration (mainly to Russia) has developed into a major means of livelihood for about half of the country's households (Olimova and Bosc 2003). In 2020, Tajikistan was among the top five of the world's most remittance-dependent countries for three consecutive years (IOM 2020). At the same time, the state's investments in the economy, education, and social security remain far below pre-independence standards (World Bank 2015), translating, for example, into low pensions for many senior citizens, who spent most of their working lives in the Soviet period (Torno 2023, 103-20).

Gulbahor's retirement plans therefore need to be viewed against the backdrop of Tajikistan's historical trajectory as well as the current economic context. However, a more complete picture of Gulbahor's worries will emerge when we consider the social clocks that organize the life courses of women (and men) in Tajikistan and how they change as persons while progressing in life. In other words, how do local constructs of gender and age inform biographical decisions (Ortner and Whitehead 1981).

In Tajikistan, age and gender are important factors marking an individual's social status, position within family and community, and division of household (care) labour (Harris 2004; Roche 2014). Men are associated with the public sphere and assume the role of the breadwinner within the family, while women are responsible for running the household and managing family affairs. Unlike most European societies, men and women in Tajikistan reach adulthood and are recognized as full members of the community far beyond the age of 18. It is with marriage and the birth of the first child that their autonomy gradually increases and reaches full social seniority with the establishment of their own household. Parents assume responsibility for the life courses of their children at least until their marriage and assist them in founding a family. Since family matters mainly lie in women's hands, mothers decide whether and what their children should study, when and whom

they should marry, and they take over the responsibility of organizing their weddings.

Young couples live in the household of the husband's parents for several months or years following their wedding, until they have raised enough money to build their own house or buy a flat. It is only after establishing an independent household that men and women are seen as full community members. Young couples aspire to this position because of the freedoms and privileges it affords them, such as participation in gift exchange (Roche 2015). During my fieldwork, I heard women speak with pride of becoming the heads of households (*zan sohibi khona*, literally woman-owner of a house), indicating a higher status in the community. Once in this position, however, they must also assume responsibility for younger family members. For example, they have to keep track of the food stocks, finances, household's interactions with kin and neighbours, and the distribution of household care work between children and daughters-in-laws. In households comprising eight or more people and several nuclear families, this can be a demanding task, particularly under rapidly changing political and economic circumstances. Gulbahor's retirement considerations and worries about the distribution of family income should be viewed against the backdrop of her social role as a mother and head of household, who is responsible not only for her own well-being, but also the well-being and life trajectories of the younger generations.

Drawing on Hareven's concept of the intersection of individual, family, and historical time, the following two sections delve into Gulbahor's life trajectory and explore it in relation to the evolution of her family and to wider historical developments. I discuss how Gulbahor managed her fertility and her children's life trajectories under changing socio-political and economic conditions and sought to optimize her own and her family's social security. Taken together, I will show how women's life-course management practices and future-making strategies span over the life course, across generations, and react to changing socio-political circumstances.

5. Managing Reproduction and Social Security over the Life Course

Gulbahor was born in 1959 in an agricultural town situated at the southernmost edge of the Soviet Union, along the north bank of the Panj river and right next to the Tajik-Afghan border. Similar to other rural settlements in the region, most inhabitants in Gulbahor's native town were employed by the local collective farm (*kolkhoz*), including her father and grown-up siblings. Her parents had ten children, like many other families in rural Tajikistan at that

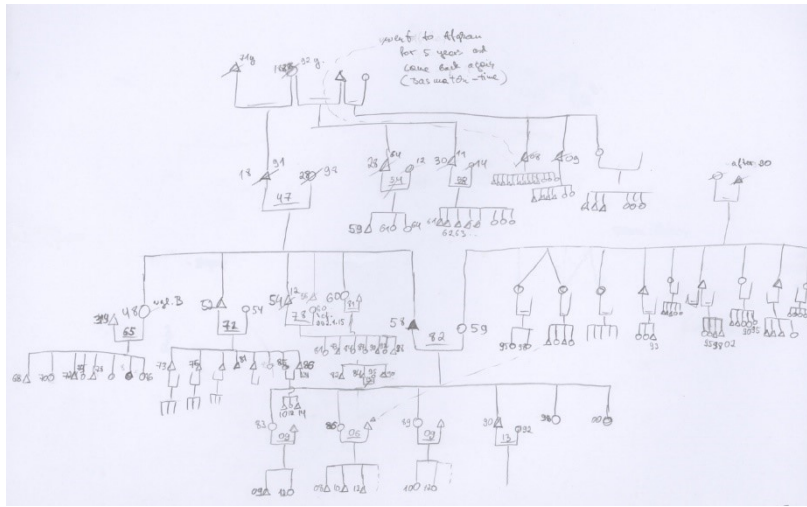
time. Gulbahor was among the eldest of seven sisters and three brothers and the only one to enrol at the university (see Figure 1, genealogy).

After school graduation, Gulbahor's parents agreed that she would study mathematics in Tajikistan's capital Dushanbe, where she met her husband Sabzali (*1958). Having dated for two years, they got married in 1982 (at the ages of 23 and 24), right after Gulbahor finished her studies. Following the rule of virilocality in the Tajik patrilineal kinship system, they moved to Kulob to live with Sabzali's parents and elder brothers in one compound.⁴ There, alongside the wives of her husband's brothers, Gulbahor provided the obligatory services of a daughter-in-law (*khizmat*), which includes running the household, serving the guests, and caring for the parents-in-law. Since Sabzali was the youngest of three sons, they later inherited Sabzali's father's house, whereas his married brothers moved out to establish independent households (*judo shudan*). By the end of the Tajik civil war (1992–1997) and after the death of her husband, Sabzali's sister returned to her parental house to live with Gulbahor's family. She stayed there for about five years and later moved to a separate house that her brothers constructed for her and her sons, thereby assuming their care responsibility for people within their kinship group.

Over the years, Gulbahor gave birth to six children – five daughters and one son. The first three daughters were born at intervals of three years: Safarmo in 1983, Rohila in 1986, and Amina in 1989. In 1990, the couple's only son (Umed) saw the light of day, and after an eight-year break the two youngest daughters Parviza (*1998) and Gulruhsor (*2000) also appeared. Since graduation and relocation to Kulob, Gulbahor has been employed in the local administration. None of her children attended a kindergarten, as there were none close to her home. Instead, Gulbahor's mother-in-law, Sabzali's sister, and her brothers' wives looked after her children while she was at work.

⁴ The Tajik patrilineal kinship system favours co-residence with the husband's parents (virilocality), allowing them to pool the productive and reproductive labour of younger generations under one roof or in close proximity. While the Soviet authorities strived to provide each nuclear family with an independent household, the practice remained widespread across Central Asia due to shortcomings on the housing market and population growth. Nowadays, young couples tend to establish their own household within shorter periods of time, and affluent strata come to reside with the parents-in-law symbolically, for two weeks or 40 days, before moving into their own flat.

Figure 1 Genealogy compiled with Sabzali on 14.8.2014 and 4.9.2014



Legend: Δ man; \circ woman; \emptyset deceased; = married; \neq divorced; 65[1965], 13[2013] year of birth, marriage, or death.

Let us pause for a moment here to examine Gulbahor’s life trajectory thus far. In many ways it reflects the particularities of the historical time and place in which it unfolded. Born in an agricultural border town, Gulbahor was the only one among ten siblings who was allowed to enrol at the university, a pattern I observed among many families in the Kulob area. Parents would often send one of their children to study, even though education was free and placed others across different employment fields. Dragadze (1988) argued that families in Soviet Georgia developed such strategies as a response to the persistent shortage economy in an attempt to obtain access to goods and services that were not easily available on the market. Moreover, the southern tier republics expanded their higher education institutions more slowly than northern ones, so that a higher proportion of Tajik youth actually transitioned from school into low-skilled jobs (Froumin and Kouzminov 2018). It was also half as common for women than for men to enter higher education in Tajikistan by the end of the Soviet period (Titma and Saar 1995). However, once on their way, Muslim women like Gulbahor had straight professional trajectories. Soviet policies encouraged women to pursue higher education and offered the graduates (of both sexes) secure employment at the end of their studies (Edgar 2006; Kruglova 2017). We can see this reflected in Gulbahor’s life trajectory, as she started to work right after marriage and continued in employment despite her numerous childbirths. This was only possible with the assistance of her household members in helping with childcare, who in return profited from her salary and easier access to goods and services.

However, far more important in people's lives in Tajikistan than education and a profession is creating a family. Tajik society encourages all able-bodied adults to marry and have children, as the latter are seen as a source of joy, spiritual wealth, continuity of the kinship line, and material support. Families in Tajikistan tend to be large, which means that women spend a great deal of their lives reproducing offspring, that is, giving birth, nurturing, educating, and providing guidance and support to children way into their (the children's) middle life. I argue that, by managing their own fertility and shaping their own and their children's life courses, women in Tajikistan seek to optimize the family livelihood and security in later life.

Following World War II, the Central Asian republics became the most fertile regions of the Soviet Union, with the Tajik SSR leading in the statistics (Ata-Mirzayev and Kayumov 1992). As already noted, Gulbahor's parents had ten children, like many other families in rural Tajikistan, where throughout the 1950s to 1970s having six or seven children was the norm. (The fertility rate in the Tajik SSR reached its peak in 1976 at 6.3 live births per woman; see Clifford, Falkingham, and Hinde 2010, 334.) This is reflected in the genealogy I recorded with Gulbahor's husband and other genealogies from the Kulob region, and it echoes the effects of Soviet pronatalist policies in the Central Asian republics (Barbieri et al. 1996). For example, the state provided one-time benefits upon the birth of a child, as well as monthly payments for children until their fifth birthday (Jones and Grupp 1987, 275-7). It also facilitated access to land and housing, and honoured mothers of five and more children as "heroine-mothers" (Russian: *mat' geroinya*), issuing them with bronze, silver, or gold medals (Harris 2004, 37). Following Tajikistan's independence, the child benefits largely disappeared, and the dire economic situation, high rate of labour migration, and uncertainty about the future contributed to a steady decline in fertility and the increased postponement of marriage (Clifford, Falkingham, and Hinde 2010; Roche, Torno, and Kazemi 2020). Nevertheless, present-day families continue to have between three and five children, seeing them as an important source of support in later life.

We can see reverberations of the fertility dynamics of the Soviet and early independence periods in Tajikistan in Gulbahor's reproductive trajectory. She began her reproductive history in the 1980s, at a time of stability and affluence with secure future prospects. In line with the ideal of large families, she gave birth to three daughters and one son. Tajikistan's independence and the subsequent civil war seem to have interrupted Gulbahor's reproductive activities. During a conversation, she mentioned that she became pregnant between 1990 and 1998 at least once, but had an abortion, thus avoiding having a fifth child under difficult political and economic circumstances. However, when at the ages 39 and 41 she became pregnant again, she decided to keep both children. I cannot rule out the possibility that a transcendent state or religious impulse underpinned Gulbahor's action. However, I suggest that

at least two other factors were relevant to her decision: the sex of the first four children and the increasing importance of sons providing financial support in old age in post-independence Tajikistan. In a conversation, a civil servant (32 years old) described the reproductive behaviour of his fellow citizens as follows:

We are doing four children here, preferably two boys and two girls. After four children, some think of having a fifth or sixth one as a back-up [Russian: *strahovka*], in case something happens to one of the first four. People also try to have children early in life. Should one die unexpectedly, one leaves children behind. To leave the world childless is a great sorrow.

FB V, 08.09.2014

This remark and Gulbahor's reproductive history show how people in Tajikistan associate having a high number of children and several sons with financial security in future life. As already pointed out above, men are considered the primary breadwinners in Tajik society and often earn more money than women. This is also why people perceive families with several sons as more affluent and as having a higher living standard. If, on the other hand, parents have only one son, they seek to insure themselves against misadventure such as an accident at work or a car crash. Thus, I suggest, by giving birth twice in her early forties Gulbahor hoped to have a second son. In this way she and her husband would be financially better off in later life, while their older daughters could count on two brothers for support.

Another important aspect related to the management of reproductive history is the early onset of reproductive life. Young people (especially women) in Tajikistan are encouraged to marry early in their life course and to give birth soon thereafter. Apart from "making the family stable," as people say, this facilitates an early overlap between the life courses of the parental and children's generation. Viewed from the parents' perspective, the younger generation finishes education, starts their own family, establishes a separate household, and achieves financial independence earlier in life. The older siblings can then be involved in care work within the household and help in financing their younger siblings' education, marriage, or house construction. This life-course management strategy was the topic of a conversation with the thirty-year-old Komron from Kulob, who was left wondering about financial security in later life in Germany after finding out that I was still not married at the age of thirty:

How do we [people in Germany] go about old-age security if we do not have children until the age 30? Then they [parents in Germany] can no longer finance the children during their university years. At 50, the father is already too old, and by the time the children stand on their own feet, he is almost in his grave. This is also not beneficial for the father, because he then becomes poor in old age, and his children cannot provide for him [yet]. Here [in Tajikistan], the parents take care of their children's family

formation, they help in finding a partner, building a house, they finance the wedding, and assist the newlyweds in getting a good start.

FB VII, 27.8.2014.

Thus far, I have argued that, by managing women's fertility and reproduction, people in Tajikistan seek to optimize the family livelihood and lay the basis for care in old age. High levels of fertility during the Soviet period were one means of obtaining additional state support (children's benefits) and rare goods (plots, apartments, cars). As early as the 1960s, children were also needed for developing small-scale agricultural businesses on private family plots, such as growing apricots, lemons, or melons, which were sold in local markets or exported to the northern republics, thereby augmenting family incomes in rural areas (Abashin 2015, 388; Monogarova and Muhiddinov 1992, 20-31). However, with the devastation of Tajik economy following Tajikistan's independence, men became the principal breadwinners in many families. This evolution also underlined the role of sons as a source of financial security in later life.

In his statement, Komron also mentions that parents manage their children's family formation, and he lists a number of parental care responsibilities, such as financing children's education and arranging their marriages. Since care labour in Tajikistan is essentially divided along gender lines, it is the women who run the household and supervise their children's life courses. While fathers are considered to be the head of the family and represent the household in public, women usually have a great deal to say in internal matters. They can persuade the father (or oldest son) to let an ambitious daughter study and marry off another daughter right after (or even before) school graduation. In most families, mothers choose the spouses of their children and supervise all the steps in the complex marriage process. After marriage, they remain an important source of support for their children and assume the responsibility for their daughters-in-law, here in particular assigning care work within the household, overseeing their movement outside the house, and advising them how to take care of the grandchildren. In the following section, I examine how Gulbahor managed the life trajectories of her children.

6. Elder Women Managing the Life Trajectories of the Younger Generations

Gulbahor's eldest daughter, Safarmo (31 years), took up studies in Dushanbe after finishing school, where she met her husband and married him in 2009 (at age 26). Her husband was around the same age as Gulbahor and Sabzali, and already had a wife and several adult children. Safarmo became his second wife, and they had two children (son and daughter) at the time of the

research. In contrast to the eldest daughter, Gulbahor decided not to let her two middle daughters Rohila (28 years) and Amina (25 years) study. After school graduation both helped out their mother in the household for two years and were married at the age of 20. Rohila's husband is a maternal cousin. At the time of my research, they were living in Gulbahor's native town and had three sons. Amina lived with her husband not far from Kulob and had two daughters.⁵ In 2013, Sabzali enrolled Amina for part-time studies (*zaochno*) at Kulob University, followed in 2014 by the second daughter Rohila.⁶ The latter planned to come to Kulob with her sons during the lecture period (around 4 weeks) and live with her parents while she attended the compulsory seminars and took exams.

Gulbahor's son, Umed, completed a master's degree in Kulob in 2013 and was married immediately thereafter. Gulbahor chose a wife for him, a student at the Medical College in Kulob, whom she once saw while coming back from work. Gulbahor liked her appearance and, after finding out that she was from an affluent family, proposed to her mother. Umed, however, was not happy about his mother's decision because he was in love with someone else. Nevertheless, he complied with Gulbahor's choice, reasoning that he could take a second wife whom he liked in the future.

After graduating, Umed hoped to go to Russia to earn more money, but his parents were strictly against labour migration. He was the only son in the family, and both worried about his physical condition. Gulbahor often said "I only have one son" to underline her feelings and his importance as a male descendant and carer in later life. Sabzali helped his son find a job in Kulob city that corresponded to his degree. However, Umed quit after half a year because he was not satisfied with the salary and instead secretly enlisted in compulsory military service. Gulbahor was very upset about his decision and cried a lot. Now and then, young soldiers are injured or killed in dubious circumstances in the Tajik army, and many young men and their parents do what they can to avoid serving (Zarifi 2020). In autumn 2014, Umed's first son was born, and in 2016 his second. In the same year, Gulbahor's fourth daughter Parviza finished school and enrolled in a university in Dushanbe. She looked up to her eldest sister and dreamed of becoming a diplomat. The youngest daughter, Gulruhsor, was also supposed to take up studies. Gulbahor envisaged a medical profession for her.

The life trajectories of Gulbahor's daughters are a good example of the shifting biographical choices over the life course that arise out of changing

⁵ In the years following my 2013-2014 fieldwork, each of Gulbahor's daughters gave birth to two children.

⁶ Part-time studies have existed at Tajik higher education institutions since the Soviet period and offer the students the possibility to work alongside their studies. During my fieldwork, I met many women who took up part-time studies after the birth of their children in order to receive a degree and find a better paid job.

historical circumstances and subjective experiences. Gulbahor's eldest daughter, Safarmo, finished school in 2001 and took up her studies in Dushanbe at a time when many parents in Kulob were restricting the mobility of their daughters out of fear for their security and sexual integrity. Sabzali told me that Safarmo was one of the best students in her class and was persistent in pursuing her goals. This is also true of the choice of her partner, whom she met in the capital city. In the same year, her younger sister, Amina, was married into a family from Kulob, while Rohila had been in a union with Gulbahor's sister's son for three years. Cousin marriage, especially to first cousins, is a common practice in Tajikistan, and sisters often consider marrying their children to each other.

My interlocutors associated certain advantages and disadvantages with the various forms of marriage, and Gulbahor followed different approaches when marrying off her daughters. For Rohila, she chose a financially and personally secure alternative by marrying her within her kin group. Safarmo was allowed to choose her husband, as she proved to be single-minded and began a relationship while studying. Amina was married into a family from Kulob, whom Gulbahor and her kin did not know beforehand. The family had several sons who were labour migrants and were earning comparatively well before the 2008 global financial crisis, which badly hit Russia's economy, reducing the flow of remittances for several years (Olimova and Omilov 2010). Amina was not happy with her mother's decision but did not manage to change her mind. Sabzali considered the management of his children's life trajectories to be his wife's responsibility and rarely interfered. Once when I asked him why he did not allow Rohila and Amina to continue their studies after school graduation, he pointed me to Gulbahor, saying: "She took the decision and now regrets it."

Gulbahor's views about good biographical practices evolved over the life course and with changing socio-economic circumstances. For example, in conversations with her neighbours, she expressed the opinion that it was advantageous to train young women as teachers or nurses. These professions are needed in both urban and rural areas, and women can contribute to the household income. Parviza (fourth daughter), who dreamed of going abroad, even told me once that her mother had set aside \$2,000 for her studies. In 2018, she was able to leave for Germany to work as an au-pair and later started an apprenticeship, while Gulruhsor (the youngest daughter) was enrolled at the medical college to become a nurse. Parviza's travels to Europe were (again) financed from Gulbahor's savings, as she had worked as a tailor after retiring in 2016. During her time as an au-pair, Parviza managed to save some of her pocket money and send it to her family back home. For several years, she became the main provider for Gulbahor, Sabzali, and her youngest sister due to her father's sudden unemployment and her mother's subsequent sickness.

As we can see, with advancement in life and the accumulation of different experiences, Gulbahor changed her views and adapted her biographical practices to the respective *historical time* and *family time*. When Rohila and Amina reached marriageable age, Gulbahor preferred matrimony to studies. When I asked her about her earlier choices, she was unable to explain them. It is possible that her silence was caused by discomfort about her earlier self or a difficulty in putting into words the complexity of past living circumstances that seem outdated from today's perspective. However, it is also true that in the 2000s, far fewer women were enrolled in institutions of higher education in Tajikistan, so Gulbahor's decision simply reflects the "common practice" of that time. Less than a decade later, living conditions in Tajikistan had evolved further. By the time of my 2013–2014 fieldwork, salaries in the public sector had improved and could guarantee at least a minimal living standard for a family of four to six members provided that it owned a home. At the same time, it became more difficult for labour migrants in Russia to earn enough money to support their families, while many more women were enrolled in higher education. This socio-economic context pushed Rohila and Amina to seek a degree after achieving one important milestone in a woman's (and a man's) life course, namely founding a family. It also informed Gulbahor's views on (girls') education, as in the meantime she had started to support the studies of both her middle and youngest daughters.

Coming back to the questions I raised above, what can we learn from reading Gulbahor's life trajectory with the concepts of linked lives and the intersection of individual, family, and historical time? And how does the emic perspective, or what above I have called the logics of local life worlds, change the use of analytical concepts and their interpretation in another place? We can easily see that families operate as units of social and economic support, and that events such as illnesses, unemployment, finding a new job, getting married, or giving birth propagate across the life courses of family members and enable or forestall certain transitions (higher education, early marriage, going abroad, retirement, etc.). Tajikistan's independence, the civil war, and the subsequent economic crisis accentuated the mutual interdependencies of family members and altered some decision-making processes in the synchronization of individual, family, and historical time. One interesting point is that the dire economic situation pushed more young people, in particular women, into higher education, ironically moving the "emancipation of Muslim women" farther than Soviet rule managed to achieve. In the case of Gulbahor's daughters, this was also an effect of a subjective learning process over the life course.

However, what the above account also shows is that we cannot apply concepts such as linked lives or individual agency by way of a blind automatism, nor in the way we would for a society we are familiar with. How the lives of family members are interconnected and who at what point in life can exercise

what kind of agency needs to be apprehended from the point of view of local value systems, social hierarchies, and power dynamics – in short, the logics of local social worlds. Children in Tajikistan do not assume full control over their life trajectories until they get married and reach social maturity according to local understandings. It was Gulbahor's responsibility as a mother to manage her children's biographical transitions and synchronize them with the lifepaths of other family members. That is not to say that young people in Tajikistan cannot take autonomous life-course decisions, but rather that their agency is much subtler. This is shown by Gulbahor's son, who accepted his mother's choice of a mate yet not much more than six months later escaped parental control and intimate family life by enlisting in the army.

The management of reproductive life is another case in point. By marrying earlier in life and trying to give birth to several sons, people in Tajikistan aim to optimize the distribution of income over the life course, the division of labour between the generations, and social security in later life. In this way, the life courses of the younger and older generations overlap to a greater extent, while the risks are spread over several individuals and generations, thus enabling a greater degree of social security for all the family's members. In addition, parents in Tajikistan cultivate the idea of mutual interdependence between siblings and filial piety in caring for the elderly. To this day, the majority of older people in Tajikistan are cared for by family members, and siblings assist each other in financing weddings, educational pathways, and medical care. It remains to be seen how the present mid-life cohorts, who are having fewer children than their parents, will organize eldercare in the future.

7. Towards Doing Global Sociology: A Concluding Discussion

In this article I set out by asking what we can learn from transposing concepts of the life-course paradigm to a non-European setting and tracing how this shift has changed the use and interpretation of these concepts. My discussion has concentrated on the notions of *linked lives* and the *intersection of individual, family, and historical time*, which are highly generic concepts and powerful tools with which to shed light on biographical decision-making processes within families across space and time. This conclusion is probably less surprising, given that societies around the globe have an idea of a family, which, however, can differ greatly from the idea of the nuclear family that people in Western Europe are used to thinking with. This brings me to the next point that I argued in this paper: When applying concepts in another region (or another social group), we need to reimagine them from the point of view of

different lifeworlds and in light of the logics of local value systems, social structures, power hierarchies, and ideas of the person as well as economic, political, institutional, religious, and demographic particularities.

In Tajikistan, as we saw in the discussion above, the authority to decide about life-course transitions, such as taking up higher education or getting married, does not lie completely in the hands of young people, and mothers have a large amount of say in their children's choice of a mate, age at marriage, and subject of study. In managing her children's life trajectories, Gulbahor accommodated some of their aspirations and rejected those that seemed inappropriate to her at that moment in time. Thus, when seeing Tajik family members in relation to each other, we need to pay attention to age and gender hierarchies as important factors defining the individual's position within the family and consider how people negotiate them in daily life and in light of economic constraints, individual aspirations, changing historical contexts, and experiences made over the life course. Furthermore, families in Tajikistan cultivate mutual interdependencies within and between generations and tend to support each other socially and financially throughout their lives. Elder siblings help younger siblings achieve biographical steps in their life trajectories, and they all pool money to care for their parents in old age. In times of continuous economic crisis, this might mean that the serious sickness of a parent can consume a lot of resources and impede the studies of one child or postpone the marriage of another. As a consequence, when studying such regional contexts, life-course research is better placed when individual life paths are not viewed as isolated and fully autonomous, but as interwoven with the life trajectories of other family members.

Anthropologists do long-term fieldwork and, alongside other methods, engage in the well-known method of participant observation in order to apprehend the logics of local lifeworlds as much as possible. Called the *emic perspective*, this orientation resonates with Go's notion of a Southern standpoint and, similar to Bhambra's approach, pushes the researcher to reconsider her earlier assumptions. Anthropologists learn to start their theorizing from processes, notions, and phenomena observed in the field and develop them in conversation with existing theory and concepts in anthropology and neighbouring disciplines. At times, this leads to common sense being questioned and to the limits of theories formulated based on research undertaken in the Euro-American sphere being delineated. When working with concepts derived from other places, anthropologists evaluate their explanatory potential for their own particular research and eventually refine the concepts in question. The findings ideally enter global anthropological debates and are tested, contested, and re-imagined in other cultural contexts. Clearly, this does not prevent the dominance of theories, departments, academic journals, and debates situated in the Western hemisphere. However, many colleagues do engage with local languages and scholarship in their places of study and make

serious efforts to decolonize their teaching curricula (e.g., Buell et al. 2019). A slow process it may be, but there is reason to hope that we are moving towards more plural and diverse social sciences.

Long-term fieldwork is a particularity of anthropology. What are the possible alternatives that bring the researcher closer to the emic point of view? Collaborative projects and the involvement of local researchers on equal terms is one alternative, in which the party coming from the affluent North and occupying a position of power consciously steps back and listens to local perspectives. Gabrielle Rosenthal (2022) and her colleagues worked with local research assistants in their biographical research projects in the West Bank and Uganda, thus paying justice to local ideas of personhood and bad spirits, family hierarchies, and dominant discourses on the ground. Finally, researchers can engage with the local scholarly literature, online media, and anthropological scholarship on the region to familiarize themselves with the local context and be wary of misconceptions or false interpretations.

In my study on women's life courses in Tajikistan, the genealogical method proved highly valuable in visualizing the links between family members across generations and kinship groups and helped sharpen my conclusions. Families in African and Asian contexts tend to be large as well as highly flexible, fluctuating in terms of their composition and residence over time. For example, children might be sent to live with a grandparent or an aunt to ensure better care or help out in the household. This could deprive a child of school education or, on the contrary, allow them to study at a college. Sketching genealogies or rudimentary family trees with interlocutors during research can help uncover the links between large family groups that can be decisive in the unfolding of individual life trajectories but would go unnoticed if not asked about explicitly.

Qualitative life-course interviews, in combination with the genealogical method, explore life trajectories and transitions in more detail and provide rich contextual data for further analytical work. Since they are closer to the research participants, they allow insights into biographical events from their own perspective, reflecting the logics of local social worlds and enriching the contextual analysis of life courses. Qualitative biographical research is well suited to generating hypotheses about life courses in substantially different regions of the world that can be tested later in quantitative studies. For example, in my genealogical sample from Kulob, I noticed that younger female siblings entered university more often than older female siblings and tended to marry later in life. A quantitative study would be better placed to test whether this hypothesis can be generalized for one or several age cohorts and historical contexts.

Taken together, I argue that, in doing Global Sociology, researchers need to pay attention to how they build and link analytical categories, establish correlations in their data, and formulate conclusions. In the process of data

analysis, researchers need to take the local (emic) standpoint into account and formulate statements from the point of view of locally observed social logics. If concepts are able to accommodate the logic of the field and vice versa, then they can travel globally, or at least between the locality of the concept's inception and the geographical space of its application.

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Doing Global Sociology: Qualitative Methods and Biographical Becoming after the Postcolonial Critique
- An Introduction.

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