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Advances in Life Course Research

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/alcr

Editorial

Intergenerational relations across the life course

Anja Steinbach*

University of Duisburg-Essen, Department of Sociology, Lotharstr. 65, 47057 Duisburg, Germany

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 28 June 2012

Accepted 29 June 2012

Keywords:

Intergenerational relationships

Generations

Life course

Welfare states

Family

Panel studies

ABSTRACT

Issues of intergenerational relationships within family and kinship increased in salience in the public's mind as well as in scientific research beginning in the late 20th century, when intense demographic change, including increased life expectancy and decreased fertility, began to impinge upon the functioning of the welfare state. One effect of this new interest was that several larger studies were launched to explore the situation of elderly individuals in modern western societies, including also questions of their relationships with family members. Furthermore, both previously and newly initiated longitudinal surveys now make more frequent use of instruments on parent–child relationships. In this volume, *Intergenerational Relations Across the Life Course*, papers were assembled reporting on important longitudinal studies in modern western societies that utilized measures on intergenerational relations, including for example the LSOG (USA), the NKPS (The Netherlands), the LOGG (Norway), pairfam (Germany), and SHARE (15 European countries). Bringing these papers together clarifies the important joint findings of these studies, which until now have not been compared systematically from the perspective of intergenerational relationships.

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In the late 20th century, major demographic changes began to alter the composition of advanced industrial countries. These changes, which include but are not limited to increased life expectancy, decreased fertility, higher rates of divorce and re-marriage, and greater mobility, are threatening the long-term sustainability of social welfare institutions (Bengtson & Putney, 2000; Saraceno, 2008). They have also turned the details of intergenerational relationships among family and kin into highly salient issues for public discourse and scientific research.

Most research on intergenerational relationships starts out by reflecting upon the hypothesis that modern demography destroys family solidarity. By way of specifying and testing this “family-in-crisis” hypothesis, various aspects of family relations have been scrutinized. The most important contributions in this vein of

discourse are the theory of intergenerational solidarity (Bengtson & Roberts, 1991) and the work on ambivalence (Lüscher & Pillemer, 1998). These contributions discuss many different aspects of contact and supportive behavior within the family and between generations. Deeply rooted in social exchange theory, intergenerational relationships are understood as any form of exchange between generations, but six specific dimensions of exchange or “solidarity” are distinguished: structural, associative, affective, consensual, normative, and functional. The *structural dimension* refers to the opportunity structure that frames the specific way that family interactions are undertaken. Typical measurements are geographic distance and residential proximity; but the availability of kin, parents, children, and siblings and their respective ages, sex, marital status, health status, and working arrangements are also seen as important structural factors affecting these relations. The *associative dimension* refers to the amount and kind of intergenerational contact, including personal contact and electronically mediated communication. A distinction is

* Tel.: +49 203 379 1344/1429; fax: +49 203 379 4350.

E-mail address: anja.steinbach@uni-due.de.

made between the frequency and intensity of contact. The *affective dimension* touches on the quality of the relationship between children and their parents, measured in terms of emotional closeness and of conflict. The *consensual dimension* measures the amount of agreement in values and beliefs, irrespective of the specific content of convictions. The *normative dimension* refers to the extent of commitment to filial and parental obligations by the respective members of intergenerational relationships. The *functional dimension* measures all forms of financial, instrumental, and emotional support that are exchanged between parents and children. Note that interaction between generations need not be necessarily positive. Intergenerational relations can (and typically do) comprise both positive and negative components and are thus *ambivalent*.

Theoretical discussions of intergenerational relationships had been, and to some extent still are, centered around the question of whether the six dimensions noted above are adequate (Szydlik, 2000) and complete (Bengtson, Giarrusso, Mabry, & Silverstein, 2002; Lüscher & Pillemer, 1998) for the purpose of explaining intergenerational relations, their causes, and their effects. Recent discussions are critical and have revealed theoretical deficits in the established paradigms (Hammarström, 2005; Katz, Lowenstein, Phillips, & Daatland, 2005). Yet, serious attempts at formulating new theoretical explanations of how the dimensions of intergenerational relationships emerge and change are seldom made (Merz, Schuengel, & Schulze, 2007). Apart from the heuristic model of Szydlik (2000), which links the associative, affective, and functional dimensions to structures of opportunity, need, family, and cultural-context, no elaborated theory of intergenerational relationships exists. Therefore, a central question remains: Why do some parents and children enjoy close and satisfying relations but others do not? Or, from a longitudinal perspective: What keeps families together and how do these sources of cohesion change over time? (Aldous, 1990, p. 579).

For answering these questions, life course research offers crucial and helpful insights. It directs our focus on childhood experiences for explaining children's relations to their parents in adulthood. Periodically, mention is made in the literature of this link (e.g., Rossi & Rossi, 1990; Silverstein, Conroy, Wang, Giarrusso, & Bengtson, 2002), but no comprehensive explanation of how exactly childhood experiences affect parent–adult child relations has been offered as yet. The value of children (VOC) approach (Trommsdorff & Nauck, 2010), however, is filling much of the gap. From the VOC standpoint, it is necessary to start empirical observations of intergenerational relations before conception, looking specifically at the parents' decision process regarding procreation and, importantly, the expectations they associate with having children. The VOC approach is able to show that for parents, children are associated with very specific kinds of value and that parents' expectations regarding the obtainability of these values play a role in their decisions to have a first or additional child. For obtaining the hoped-for advantage, appropriate behavioral strategies

must be selected and implemented. The VOC approach yields concrete, testable predictions about child-bearing. It also suggests that parenting behavior, too, is closely related to expectations regarding the benefits of (grown) children (Mayer, Albert, Trommsdorff, & Schwarz, 2005). The parent–child relationship begins at birth and becomes highly intricate, being linked by bonds to multiple family members. The lessons of attachment theory encourage us to consider both the quality and the quantity of investments that parents make in their children. As early as 10 years after birth, a close connection between parental care and the quality of the attachment can be observed; this might be considered the “reward” for parents' early psychological investments (Grossmann & Grossmann, 2004). Thus, when looking at intergenerational relations among adults, we should not forget that they have a long pre-history and that they depend on the quality of the reciprocal attachment (Ainsworth, 1985). An important consequence of the development and maintenance of affective bonds from childhood through adulthood is the emergence of both a sense of duty to support the person to whom one is attached and a willingness to honor this duty. Support is latently ready and given when needed, most especially if the history of the relationship is positive. But regular, confiding contact must be present if family members are to know whether support is needed and if they are to overcome inhibitions against asking for help. Such contact also shores up the emotional basis of the relationship. These self-reinforcing processes are also found in other social relations of exchange but are normatively strengthened in families through, for example, ritualized celebrations that help guarantee at least a minimum of involvement. Following this logic, the “goal” of attachment systems involving adult children and parents is to ensure the availability of a trusted person for the exchange of support (Ainsworth, 1985) such that one can reasonably expect that the channels of communication are open, physical access is not blocked, and a request for help will instigate a reaction.

This special issue *Intergenerational Relations Across the Life Course* of *Advances in Life Course Research* aims to review recent trends of life course research based on new data sources from several large-scale panel studies in multiple countries. All of these studies, summarized briefly below, have great potential for contributing to the analysis of intergenerational relations. All use a panel design, which makes it possible to track changes in intergenerational relations in specific families and therefore to test the theoretical (i.e., causal) assumptions of life course research. Secondly, all of these studies will continue to be highly relevant for future research because they utilize comprehensive instruments to measure intergenerational relationships, measures that are similar enough to allow comparison across data files. In this way, national studies can be aggregated into international comparisons. To this end, we hope that this special issue will encourage analysts to work with the data files discussed here, all of which are publicly available, and shed more light on the many

fascinating questions in the field of intergenerational research.

1. New data

Both new and previously established data sets were used for the analysis of intergenerational relationships in the articles for this special issue. These include large-scale data sets like the German Socio-Economic Panel Study (GSOEP) (Wagner, Frick, & Schupp, 2007) or the American National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH) (Sweet & Bumpass, 2002), both of which include respondents from a wide range of ages. Data sets from research on ageing are relevant and were also used, such as the German Ageing Survey (DEAS) (Kohli & Künemund, 2005) or the Survey of Health, Ageing and Retirement in Europe (SHARE) (Börsch-Supan & Jürges, 2005). These surveys focus on the population aged 40 and over. The German Panel Analysis of Intimate Relationships and Family Dynamics (pairfam) (Huinink et al., 2011) provides data on the intergenerational relationships of younger respondents, aged 15–35, with their parents and, when present, their stepparents. Other important national studies of intergenerational relations are the Dutch Kinship Panel Study (NKPS) (Dykstra et al., 2005, 2007), the Norwegian Life-Course Generations and Gender Study (LOGG) (Statistics Norway, 2010), and the Longitudinal Study of Generations (LSOG) (Giarrusso & Zucker, 2004). A brief description of these data sets follows.

German Socio-Economic Panel Study (GSOEP)

The GSOEP of the German Institute for Economic Research (DIW) has collected annual data for measuring stability and change in German living standards since 1984 (Wagner et al., 2007). Beginning in the 1990s, it periodically (1991, 1996, 2001, 2006) augmented its instruments with items on intergenerational relationships, including residential distance and emotional closeness to biological parents and to the closest living son or daughter (if the respondent had more than one). The level of financial transfers between generations has been recorded since 1984 with the exceptions of 1992 and 1994; these include intergenerational gifts, inheritance, and bequests.

German Ageing Survey (DEAS)

The German Ageing Survey of the German Center of Gerontology is a study of German residents aged 40 and over. Three waves have been completed so far, in 1996, 2002, and 2008 (Kohli & Künemund, 2005). For all children, for all individuals with whom the respondent spent a predominant number of childhood years, and for up to eight additional network members, the following dimensions of intergenerational relations are captured: residential distance, frequency of contact, and emotional closeness. Exchange of support is captured using a network generator, within which it is possible to name up to five persons with whom the respondent exchanges financial, instrumental

and emotional support. Childcare for grandchildren is also captured, as well as inheritance and bequest. A new grandchild module was integrated in Wave 3.

Longitudinal Study of Generations (LSOG)

The Longitudinal Study of Generations (Giarrusso & Zucker, 2004) research project began in 1971 as a survey of intergenerational relations among 300 three-generation California families including grandparents, middle-aged parents, and grandchildren. The purpose of the still-active study is to investigate change and stability in intergenerational relations over decades, and, as each generation ages, to explore how these changes impact the well-being of individuals within the family. The study has broadened since its inception to include a fourth generation, the great-grandchildren in these same families. The most recent surveys were undertaken in 1985, 1988, 1991, 1994, 1997, and 2001. Because it touches on a very large number of aspects of intergenerational relations, this study became something of a central reference point for all other studies on intergenerational relations globally, especially in the design of survey instruments.

Norwegian Life-Course Generations and Gender Study (LOGG)

LOGG encompasses the first wave of the Norwegian Generations and Gender Survey (GGG-Norway) and the second wave of the Norwegian study on life course, ageing, and generations (NorLAG). The survey, which was conducted in 2007–2008 and was intended to provide policy-relevant data on family change and family behavior, focused specifically on the processes of childbearing, partnership dynamics, home-leaving, and retirement. Statistics Norway was responsible for conducting the GGP in Norway in cooperation with Norwegian Social Research (NOVA) (Statistics Norway, 2010). The LOGG contained questions regarding residential distance, filial obligations, and family attitudes. Financial, instrumental, and emotional support were captured with a network generator, within which it was possible to name family members.

Netherlands Kinship Panel Study (NKPS)

The Netherlands Kinship Panel Study (Dykstra et al., 2005, 2007) is the Dutch participant in the Generations and Gender Programme (GGP). The GGP is a system of nationally comparative surveys and contextual databases that aims at improving the knowledge base for policy making in countries of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE). The Netherlands Interdisciplinary Demographic Institute (NIDI), Utrecht University, the Erasmus University Rotterdam, and the University of Amsterdam are participating in the development of this large-scale database on Dutch families. The research questions revolve around the theme of solidarity, which is defined as feelings of mutual affinity in family relationships and how these are expressed in behavioral terms. Three

waves of an extensive face-to-face interview have been conducted (Wave 1 in 2002–2004, Wave 2 in 2006–2007, Wave 3 in 2010–2011). The study also includes a multi-actor-design.

American National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH)

The NSFH was designed to provide a broad range of information on family life for interdisciplinary research (Sweet & Bumpass, 2002). A considerable amount of life-history information was collected including the respondent's family living arrangements in childhood, departures and returns to the parental home, and histories of marriage, cohabitation, education, fertility, and employment. The NSFH is a national probability sample of non-institutionalized persons aged 19 and older in the United States. It was first conducted in 1987 with an original sample of over 13,000 respondents (Wave 2: 1992–1994, Wave 3: 2001–2003). The NSFH includes a detailed roster of family members and detailed information about a randomly selected minor focal child. The study includes respondents (G2) reporting comprehensively on relationships with parents (G1) as well as adult children (G3).

Panel Analysis of Intimate Relationships and Family Dynamics (pairfam)

Pairfam is a comprehensive research program on partnership and family development in Germany (Huinink et al., 2011). It is based on a cohort design, comprising three cohorts of anchor persons aged 15–17, 25–27, and 35–37. It utilizes a multi-actor design that included the respective partner, both parents, and children 8 years and older. Data collection of the first wave took place in 2008/2009. Afterwards a yearly panel has been and will continue to be conducted. Short versions of instruments on intergenerational relationships were included in the first wave: residential distance, frequency of contact, and emotional closeness. From the second wave onwards, comprehensive instruments on residential distance, frequency of contact, emotional closeness, conflict, ambivalence, agreement on filial obligations, as well as material/financial, instrumental and emotional transfers are used. The relationship with both biological parents and, if present, to stepparents is targeted.

Survey of Health, Ageing and Retirement in Europe (SHARE)

SHARE is an international longitudinal research program that comprises 15 countries in Europe (Börsch-Supan & Jürges, 2005). Three panel waves were conducted, in 2004/2005, 2006/2007, and 2008/2009. The first wave captured target persons aged 50 and older and their household partners. Intergenerational relationships are captured by residential distance, frequency of contact, and emotional closeness to parents and all children living outside the respondent's household. Help received is captured by questions regarding the source of material and financial transfers including nursing care, if

applicable, within the last 12 months. Up to three individuals can be named. Childcare of grandchildren is also captured.

As argued and demonstrated in the studies of this special issue, a life course perspective that utilizes longitudinal data to cover the development of intergenerational relationships across the entire life span and under varying family settings, including non-biological forms of parent-child relations, is of particularly great value for obtaining a better understanding of intergenerational relationships in today's societies. Only this kind of approach ensures the development of valid measurements of intergenerational solidarity, conflict, and separation in its various dimensions and allows inference of robust estimates of how intergenerational solidarity and social integration develop over time in individual families and in larger aggregates.

2. The contributions

In recent research on intergenerational relationships, the life course perspective has become more prevalent. Although cross-sectional data are most common, these data are not as useful as longitudinal data for answering questions about whether and how early life stages matter for intergenerational relationships in later life. Specific questions include how parents' early transfers to their young adult children affect children's propensity in middle age to provide social support to their ageing parents (Silverstein et al., 2002) and how life course transitions experienced by each generation affect the quality of the relationship between adult children and their parents (Kaufman & Uhlenberg, 1998). Parental separation and divorce as an obstacle for later-life intergenerational relationships has become an especially important research issue (Aquilino, 2005; Kalmijn, 2008; Lin, 2008), as has the relationship between attachment patterns in early childhood and the exchange of support in later life stages (Cicirelli, 1993; Merz, Schuengel, & Schulze, 2008; Schwarz & Trommsdorff, 2005). The articles in this special issue deepen our knowledge of these central mechanisms and provide insight into many other issues, as well.

The first paper by Marc Szydlik, "Generations: Connections Across the Life Course," provides an overview of intergenerational relationships from the life course perspective with a focus on family-state interactions. In his lucid explanation of help, care, and inheritance, Szydlik makes use of his own theoretical model of intergenerational relationships. His now well-established model is particularly useful for empirical modeling, in international contexts, of hypotheses on the formation of familial relationships because it facilitates the separation of conditional factors (opportunity, need, family, and cultural-context) at different levels of measurement (individual, family, and society). His empirical analyses of help and care are drawn from the "Survey of Health, Aging, and Retirement in Europe" (SHARE). For investigating inheritance, data from the German Socio-Economic Panel (GSOEP) are used. By

looking at both sources of data, he investigates not only connections between the welfare state and family but also between cohesion and (social) inequality. These are important aspects of familial transmission processes.

The article by Joohong Min, Merril Silverstein, and Jessica P. Lendon, “Intergenerational Transmission of Values over the Family Life Course,” also investigates transmission processes, but with a focus on the familial values of religious belief and gender-role attitudes. Taking a life course perspective and working both theoretically and empirically, the authors draw on data from a study that has now reached its 40th year of implementation. This makes it possible to observe not only the fact of value transmission but also the persistence of transferred values and the timing of their transmission over the life course. Their analysis draws from the 1971 and 2000 waves of the Longitudinal Study of Generations (LSOG). The authors are able to show that intergenerational similarity of values is mostly the result of early transmission. Like Szydlik, they also examine the influence of relational, life course, and societal processes.

The paper by Niels Schenk and Pearl Dykstra, “Continuity and Change in Intergenerational Family Relationships,” also relies on longitudinal data, in this case from the Netherlands Kinship Panel Study (NKPS). They investigate changes in the type of intergenerational relations over a period of 3 years, modeling types based on different combinations of solidaristic acts and conflict. They find considerably more continuity than change in adult–parent relationships. This suggests that the processes modeled in life course research require longer time periods to become evident. However, this may also be evidence of the fact that relationships are very stable once established and, as shown in this contribution, that changes in intergenerational relationships are induced mostly by rather infrequent biographic events including divorce and separation, birth, decline in health, job change, and household relocation.

Svein Olaf Daatland, Marijke Veenstra, and Katharina Herlofson’s paper, “Age and Intergenerational Attitudes in the Family and the Welfare State,” refocuses our attention on the connections linking families to society. It asks whether family and welfare-state attitudes are generally characterized more by generational altruism or by self-interest, and, additionally, to what extent family attitudes and experiences are reflected in attitudes about welfare state priorities. The empirical analyses are based on the Norwegian Life-course Generations and Gender Study (LOGG). The findings suggest that attitudes are mixed in both areas, but tend toward altruism in regard to the family and self-interest in regard to the welfare state.

As mentioned above, major demographic trends in the 20th century had a strong impact on the analysis of intergenerational relationships. One response to these shifts was the expansion of analysis beyond the parent–child dyad to include intergenerational relationships between grandparents and grandchildren, as in the paper by Katharina Mahne and Andreas Motel-Klingebiel, “The Importance of the Grandparent Role – a Class Specific

Phenomenon?”. In the light of changing opportunity structures for grandparents, they address older parents’ attitude towards the grandparent role. The special focus of the paper is thereby on the interactive effects of the grandparent role and social class. The analyses are based on data from the German Ageing Survey (DEAS). The results show that the subjective importance of experienced as well as prospective grandparenthood does not vary by social class. Instead, relationship quality with grandchildren is most highly influenced, positively, by the perceived importance of the grandparent role.

Daniela Klaus, Bernhard Nauck, and Anja Steinbach address in their paper, “Relationships to Stepfathers and Biological Fathers in Adulthood,” another major issue of contemporary modern societies: the impact of family dissolution on intergenerational relations. The paper investigates relationships of adolescents and young adults with biological and social fathers in individual families. It asks, how do children deal with the fact that they must carry out relations with two fathers? Empirical data are drawn from the German Family Panel (pairfam). A series of multivariate models show that the residence pattern, the event of leaving the parental home, the duration of the step relation, the mother’s marital status, and the quality of the relationship to the mother are predictive for the pattern of father–child–stepfather relations.

Adam Shapiro’s paper “Rethinking Marital Status, Partnership History and Intergenerational Relationships in American Families” also investigates the linkages between family or partnership dissolution and intergenerational relations. On the basis of the American National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH), he shows that the complexity of family members’ histories – in terms of marriages and non-marital unions – has an influence on intergenerational relations. Individuals with multiple marriages and/or cohabiting unions consistently report lower levels of intergenerational solidarity in comparison with those who have had only one stable partnership.

3. Issues for future study

Collectively, the studies brought together in this issue represent a major improvement in the state of the art of life course research and shed much light on the form, prevalence, and development of intergenerational relationships. As comprehensive as they are, however, the articles presented here are far from the last word on the state of relations between the generations. Several interesting questions remain.

All of the contributions demonstrate the advantages to be gained by taking a life course approach to investigate intergenerational relationships. Some of the special issue’s authors were able to make use of new panel data to gain substantial theoretical purchase, other authors had to work around the fact that long-term data were not yet available to them at the time of writing. In the future, the use of long-term panel data will be a must, as the analyses clearly demonstrate that the development of family relationships over time does matter. Longitudinal

data help us better understand typical patterns of development and how they (causally) contribute to intergenerational relationships. Future analyses should be long-term in nature, incorporating different age groups or phases in family life. This means, also, investigating changes in familial composition so as to find some of the root causes of family dissolution.

Another aspect to which most of the authors draw our attention is the link between the familial level of intergenerational relationships and the national-level institutions of the welfare states. Today, there are not many cross-national comparative data that touch on these issues, but it may be possible in the future to merge the growing number of national data sets that use similar instruments so as to facilitate international comparisons. We can expect much more of this kind of research in the future, for the connection of the micro and macro under consideration of interactive effects is an exceedingly promising enterprise.

Finally, it will be important in future research to consider intergenerational relationships from the respective standpoint of the different generations involved. This means incorporating as many generations as possible, i.e., three instead of two. It also means investigating the linkages between the different dyads of grandparents (G1), parents (G2), and grandchildren/children (G3). For doing this, data from all three generations are necessary, implying also more sophisticated survey designs and analytical methods.

Generational relationships are at the interface between the micro-level of family sociology, the meso-level of network analysis and human ecology, and the macro-level of social integration and inequality. Understanding these relationships calls for looking at the entire life span of several family generations, an approach that invites and facilitates interdisciplinary cooperation among a large number of disciplines including developmental psychology, social gerontology, demography, economy, and sociology. Because of their importance to a large variety of family and state institutions and a large number of disciplines, intergenerational relationships will continue to draw the attention of analysts worldwide and will benefit from more sophisticated designs that capture the advantages of more comprehensive, longitudinal data.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to all of the reviewers for their feedback on the original manuscript drafts. The suggestions and comments were extremely valuable.

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