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Intergenerational transmission of behavioural patterns: How similar are parents' and children's demographic trajectories?

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ABSTRACT

This study examines whether intergenerational continuity exists in the demographic trajectories of parents and children during young adulthood. A new indicator to measure similarity, based on the idea that trajectories are more similar, the more subtrajectories they have in common, is compared to a similarity indicator based on optimal matching. Using data on parents and children from the NSFH, it is shown that intergenerational transmission of demographic trajectories exists, despite the dramatic changes in such trajectories in the last half-century. Continuities in demographic patterns across generations to a large extent result from continuities in general societal processes that structure the life course, but processes that operate within the family itself are important as well. Substantive and methodological implications of the findings are discussed.

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1. Introduction

The extent to which behaviours are transmitted from parents to children is of key interest to social scientists, because the level of intergenerational transmission can be viewed as an indicator of the openness of a society and of the ability of the family system to transmit preferred behaviour to the next generation. Intergenerational transmission has been studied with regard to topics like educational attainment (Mare & Maralani, 2006), fertility (Barber, 2001), union formation (Thornton, 1991) and divorce (Diekmann & Engelhardt, 1999; Wolfinger, 1999). Most of this research has focused on the intergenerational transmission of specific behaviours rather than behavioural patterns. This is unfortunate, because it is likely that parents will not just try to transmit specific behaviours to their children, but will rather try to transmit their 'way of

life'. If so, one would expect continuities in the behavioural trajectories of parents and their children. However, little is known about the extent to which trajectories of parents and children resemble each other.

Major reasons for this state of affairs are the lack of appropriate data and the lack of appropriate methods. In order to study the transmission of behavioural trajectories, information is needed on the timing of major events in the lives of both parents and children. Such data are rarely collected. In addition, methods are needed that allow the level of similarity of the trajectories to be assessed. In this article, we explore the usefulness of sequence analytic methods to estimate the level of similarity between behavioural trajectories of parents and children (Elzinga, 2005). To do so, we use data on the family life trajectories of parents and children in the National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH).

After a brief discussion of the reasons why intergenerational transmission of demographic trajectories is likely, our methods to estimate the level of intergenerational transmission are introduced, followed by a discussion of the data used to illustrate our methods. Next, empirical estimates of the level of intergenerational transmission are presented, and it is examined whether the extent of this

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transmission varies across relevant subpopulations. The main results and implications are discussed in the concluding section.

2. Background

The process by which young adults gain independence from their family of origin and constitute a family of their own has changed considerably (Arnett, 2004; Buchmann, 1989; Goldscheider & Goldscheider, 1999; Modell, 1989; Mouw, 2005). Over the last decades, we have witnessed postponement of marriage and parenthood (Kohler, Billari, & Ortega, 2002; Schoen & Canudas-Romo, 2005), an increase in “new” living arrangements like unmarried cohabitation (Bumpass & Lu, 2000; Goldscheider, 1997) and an increase in dissolutions of both marital and non-marital unions (Teachman, 2004). As a result, the demographic life course of today’s young adults differs substantially from that of their parents (Elzinga & Liefbroer, 2007; Fussell & Furstenberg, 2005; Shanahan, 2000; Wu & Li, 2005). These profound changes raise the question whether intergenerational continuity in demographic trajectories still exists. It could be argued that parental trajectories are no longer useful to orient young adults in their own transition to adulthood since youths are more likely to seek guidance from cultural scripts diffused by the media and within youth cultures. In addition, in a society that emphasizes the importance of autonomy, children may want to assert their autonomy with regard to crucially important decisions concerning family life.

At the same time, a number of empirical and theoretical arguments can be given to suggest that intergenerational transmission of demographic trajectories is likely, even within individualized societies. Empirical research that focuses on the transmission of the occurrence and timing of specific demographic events suggests intergenerational continuity in the timing of these events (Amato, 1996; Barber, 2000, 2001; Diekmann & Engelhardt, 1999; Furstenberg, Levine, & Brooks-Gunn, 1990; Wolfinger, 1999). Furthermore, research shows that family-life trajectories of parents influence several aspects of their children’s trajectories, like entry into unmarried cohabitation and marriage (Thornton, 1991) and the timing and number of divorces (Wolfinger, 2000). At the same time, a number of important theoretical mechanisms that link the demographic trajectories of parents and children have been suggested. First, similarities in the trajectories of parents and children can be attributed to *socialization* processes (Amato, 1996; Glass, Bengtson, & Dunham, 1986; Grusec, Goodnow, & Kuczynski, 2000). Children are thought to behave like their parents because they adopt the same set of values and attitudes that their parents adhere to. Intergenerational transmission of attitudes and values has been shown to occur with regard to divorce (Kapinus, 2004), gender role ideology (Moen, Erickson, & Dempster-McClain, 1997), intentions towards marriage and parenthood (Starrels & Holm, 2000), and attitudes towards family formation (Axinn & Thornton, 1993, 1996). In addition, parental values and attitudes have been shown to affect young adults’ decisions about leaving the

parental home (Goldscheider & Goldscheider, 1993), choosing between married or unmarried cohabitation (Axinn & Thornton, 1993; Barber, Axinn, & Thornton, 2002) and the timing of marriage and parenthood (Barber, 2000; Barber et al., 2002). Second, *status inheritance* or the intergenerational provision of opportunities has been suggested as an alternative mechanism producing similarities in behavioural patterns (Glass et al., 1986; Kalmijn, Liefbroer, van Poppel, & van Solinge, 2006; Moen et al., 1997). Here the basic idea is that parents and children act similar because they are exposed to similar opportunity structures. A third transmission mechanism that could lead to similarity between parents and children in their demographic trajectories is genetic inheritance. For example, Kohler, Rodgers, and Christenen (1999) suggest that there might be a genetic transmission of fertility patterns. Based on these potential mechanisms, the key hypothesis to be explored is that *demographic trajectories of parents and their children are more similar than the trajectories of arbitrary, non-related persons from the parent- and the child-generation.*

3. Measuring similarities between trajectories

Establishing (dis-)similarity between trajectories or sequences of parents and children amounts to comparing pairs of sequences and it is not immediately obvious how to do this. The best-known technique of sequence comparison, “optimal matching” (OM), was introduced into the social sciences by Abbott and Forrest (1986). Using OM amounts to quantifying distance between a pair of sequences as the minimal cost or weight of a series of edit operations that is necessary to create identical sequences. Hence, the first step in applying OM consists of specifying the cost of the admissible edit operations: insertion, deletion and substitution. As these costs may vary per state or combinations of states, such a specification has the form of a square (symmetric) matrix. Over the last decade, many methods to construct such matrices have been proposed (see, e.g. Gauthier, Widmer, Bucher, & Notre Dame, 2009). Aassve, Billari, and Piccarreta (2007) provide a recent application of OM in demography, and accessible introductions are provided by Abbott and Tsay (2000), Billari (2001), Brüderl and Scherer (2005) and Martin and Wiggins (2011). However, the use of OM has been seriously contested (Elzinga, 2003; Settersten & Mayer, 1997; Wu, 2000). The distances generated by OM are thought to be quite sensitive to the sequences having different lengths. This is a potential drawback if demographic trajectories are being observed for different periods of time. In addition, the edit operations required to determine OM-distance have no clear substantive interpretation in social science research. OM determines the distance between two demographic trajectories by counting the minimum number of deletions, insertions or substitutions necessary to equalize them. However, it is hard to imagine deleting or substituting demographic states. In response to these criticisms, Elzinga (2003, 2005) developed an alternative method to measure similarity between trajectories. In this article, both methods are compared. Given that Elzinga’s method is

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