



ELSEVIER

Contents lists available at SciVerse ScienceDirect

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.

© 2012 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

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

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/313257>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/313257>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)