



Generations: Connections across the life course

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ABSTRACT

Five kinds of connections are discussed in this paper: (1) Family generations are connected across the life course. Parents and (adult) children are linked by strong lifelong bonds. (2) At the same time, there are long-term connections between family and the state. For example, welfare state regulations affect the extent and patterns of intergenerational solidarity within families. (3) One can observe connections between generational bonds and social stratification. Over the life course, family solidarity leads to a cumulation of social inequality. (4) A theoretical model is offered which centrally proposes connections between individual needs and opportunities, families and cultural-contextual structures. (5) Connections between theoretical considerations and empirical research are discussed, taking help, care and inheritance as examples.

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1. Introduction

How strong is the solidarity between family generations across the life course? What happens when children grow older and leave their parents' household? Is there still a connection between adult children and parents who do not live in the same household any more? Do they help each other, for example, in the household, in the case of illness or old age, or in form of financial transfers? Previous research has shown that private intergenerational relations do not break up in adulthood and old age (e.g. Brandt, Haberkern, & Szydlik, 2009; Nauck, 2009; Rossi & Rossi, 1990; Silverstein & Bengtson, 1997; Steinbach, 2010; Szydlik, 2000, 2008). In fact, one can speak of a lifelong solidarity between parents and children, reaching from cradle to grave. However, these are general results only. In order to develop a more thorough picture, one needs to address further important issues.

Empirical research shows considerable differences between various population groups in regard to intergenerational cohesion. Moreover, recent research suggests

tremendous differences between countries. This implies that private intergenerational relations are affected by societal circumstances, including welfare state regulations. Therefore, it is a crucial research question to what extent intergenerational cohesion across the life course depends on contextual factors. Are there different solidarity patterns within families in reaction to societal conditions? What are the connections between public and private intergenerational transfers? The proposed interconnectedness between family and society also leads to questions of societal and familial change. In this respect, demographic change and new flexibilisation demands on the labor market may lead to alterations in welfare policies and new family outcomes. How stable are bonds between family members across generations over the life course?

The connection between family and society goes in both directions. On the one hand, societal contexts influence lifelong intergenerational behavior. On the other hand, family solidarity may have strong consequences for societies at large. An especially important connection is the one between intergenerational solidarity within families and social inequality. In general, parents help their children as good as they can. Obviously, parents from higher social classes have better opportunities for doing so. It is a crucial research topic to investigate the lifelong

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bonds between parents and (adult) children in regard to their consequences for social stratification. Again, a life course approach is most suitable here.

Connections between family and society require sociological research with sound links between theoretical considerations and empirical research. It is an important sociological task to find out why some population groups show stronger intergenerational solidarity across the life course than others and which different patterns can be observed. As a basis for corresponding empirical analyses, a general theoretical model is proposed, consisting of individual, familial and societal characteristics, specifically opportunity and need structures, family structures and cultural contexts.

The goal of this paper is to offer conceptual reasoning on intergenerational relations in a life-course perspective – focusing on linkages between the state, family and stratification. The general theoretical argumentation refers to relevant examples of intergenerational solidarity, particularly help, care and bequests. The paper is structured as follows: In the next section, the above-mentioned issues will be elaborated. I will start with connections between welfare state and family before discussing consequences of private solidarity for social inequality and briefly introducing a theoretical model as the basis for empirical investigations (Section 2). Since empirical analyses are crucial in order to find out more about connections between family and society across the life course I will offer selected empirical results: Section 3 examines international differences in help and care from adult children to their elderly parents. This will lay the groundwork for empirically investigating the consequences of different welfare state regulations for private intergenerational solidarity. The results will also offer an opportunity for an empirically driven discussion of the consequences of demographic change, labor market flexibilisation and welfare state developments. Section 4 addresses the connection between society and family from the opposite direction by offering empirical results on consequences of family solidarity for social inequality focusing on inheritances. Again, a life-course approach is employed. Finally, the paper ends with some concluding remarks and indications for further research.

2. Family, state and stratification

2.1. Welfare state and family

What is the relation between welfare state regulations and intergenerational support within families? Previous hypotheses indicate two scenarios: One scenario relates to the so-called “crowding out” hypothesis according to which the welfare state displaces the family. In this line of reasoning, the family can be expected to again step into the breach in case of the welfare state’s withdrawal. Conversely, some argue that state-provided welfare services may even free familial resources and, therefore, strengthen or stimulate family solidarity (e.g. [Künemund & Rein, 1999](#)). There may also be a specific combination of private and public responsibility in terms of a mixed welfare regime, engaging both families and the state in managing

the risks of old age (see [Daatland & Herlofson, 2003](#); [Daatland & Lowenstein, 2005](#); [Igel, Brandt, Haberkern, & Szydlik, 2009](#); [Litwak, Silverstein, Bengtson, & Wilson Hirst, 2003](#); [Motel-Klingebiel, Tesch-Römer, & Kondratowitz, 2005](#); [Reil-Held, 2006](#)). This would lead to immense consequences for intergenerational solidarity across the life course. In fact, one may even assume different support patterns and intergenerational relations – with considerable consequences for life courses – depending on welfare state regulations (e.g. [Kohli, 1999](#); [Mayer, 2004](#)). Therefore, various aspects of private intergenerational solidarity may be more or less prominent in different states. For example, in regard to life courses, it is especially important to consider both the recipients and providers of help and care.

At the same time, the welfare state is increasingly coming under pressure from demographic change. The situation is especially dramatic for senior citizens in need of help and care. Requiring care is becoming a mass phenomenon: While the numbers of those in need are steadily increasing, this trend is faced with decreasing care options. The flexibilisation of work is one reason for this development. Workplace flexibility may provide better chances for achieving work-family balance if ‘flexibility’ refers to flexible arrangements granting employees scope for coping with the requirements of everyday life. For the most part, however, it is rather the flexibility demands of the workplace (temporary work, shift work, contract work, mobility in time and place) that put significant strain on family relations. After all, there is a paradoxical situation as the demand for flexibility in the realm of work contradicts the wish for stability in the realm of the family, which goes beyond issues concerning the compatibility of child care and employment. The increasing demand for flexibility in working life can have a negative impact on providing support for parents in need of help and care. Providing care is often heavily or even excessively burdensome, and with demands for flexibility being on the rise at the workplace, adult children have less disposable time available, thus exacerbating the conflict between career and care.

In addition, the labor market demand for mobility and the growing distances between residences that it gives rise to is taking an extra toll on intergenerational potentials for help and care ([BMFSFJ, 2006, p. 142](#)). Spatial distance is, after all, one of the major determinants for intergenerational solidarity among adults, if not the most significant one. Shorter geographical distances coincide with more frequent contacts, higher levels of personal assistance and closer emotional ties ([Szydlik, 2000](#)). The fact that, despite separate households, most adult children do not live far away from their parents is certainly a key reason for the strong, lifelong bonds between the generations. Yet, when the flexibilisation of labor goes along with greater geographical mobility, this is likely to increase the distance between the homes of the adult children and their parents – and can thus be expected to reduce the potential for intergenerational solidarity. Growing investments in education point in the same direction as they also tend to increase the spatial distance to the parents ([BMFSFJ, 2006, p. 138](#)). At any rate, empirical findings based on the German Aging Survey (respondents are 40–85 years old) already indicate larger distances between the residences of

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