

Life course changes of children and well-being of parents*

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Abstract: How do children's life course transitions affect parental well-being? We answer this question by analyzing a large longitudinal nationally representative sample of parents in the Netherlands, i.e., the Netherlands Kinship Panel Study. The parents were interviewed at two points in time about three to four years apart. Life course transitions for two randomly chosen children were recorded and parents' depression was measured in identical ways in the two waves. We test three hypotheses: (a) a child's divorce leads to a decline in parental well-being, (b) a child's union formation leads to an increase in parental well-being, and (c) a child's becoming a parent leads to an increase in parental well-being. In addition, we examine to what extent life course effects are due to changes in the content of the parent-child relationship. Our hypothesis is that the life course effects are explained by changes in the content of the parent-child relation. If effects are found after controlling for such changes, this may point to other theoretical mechanisms such as parental altruism or feelings of personal failure among parents.

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Introduction

Many papers have been written on the effects of life course changes on health and well-being. Studies consistently point to the positive consequences of marriage for a person's individual well-being. Transitions into marriage tend to be beneficial and transitions out of marriage, either through divorce or widowhood tend to be detrimental (Andreß and Bröckel 2007; Frech and Williams 2007; Kalmijn and Monden 2006; Lee, Willetts, and Seccombe 1998; Mastekaasa 1992; Mastekaasa 1995; Simon 2002). Usually, such effects have been interpreted in terms of the protective effects of social relationships: close relations offer resources that contribute to health, they offer support in times of need, they offer a sense of engagement which contributes to well-being, and they reinforce norms pertaining to healthy behavior (Berkman, Glass, Brisette, and Seeman 2000; House, Landis, and Umberson 1988; Waite and Gallagher 2000).

A somewhat different line of study has examined the effects of the life course transitions that one person makes on the development of well-being of another, closely related person. In this literature, the perspective on the life course is relational. Authors in this literature speak of 'linked lives,' which means that the life courses of individuals are causally linked. The most common example in this field is the study of how the life courses of parents affect the well-being trajectories of (young) children. Usually, these studies focus on the effect of parental divorce and remarriage, but some studies also examine widowhood (Umberson and Chen 1994). Consistently, it has been found that parental divorce is harmful for the level of well-being of young children (Amato 2000; Amato 1993; Cherlin, Chase-Lansdale, and McRae 1998; Dronkers 1999; Fomby and Cherlin 2007; McLanahan 2004; Sigle-Rushton, Hobcraft, and Kiernan 2005). These effects are typically interpreted in terms of the psychological stress that a separation brings to family members, the decline of financial resources after divorce, the declining role of the father after the divorce, and the decline in the time single mothers have available for their children (McLanahan and Sandefur 1994).

A less common type of study within this linked-lives perspective is the analysis of how the life courses of *children* affect *parents*. On the one hand, such an analysis would seem less useful, after all, parents are not socialized by children and

children offer no resources to parents. On the other hand, there are also good reasons to believe why parents may be affected, either positively or negatively, by the life course transitions that their children experience. First, parents have norms about behavior in the life course, and they may therefore feel better if children are behaving in the way they normatively expect them to behave (Hagestad 1986). Second, parents may regard the success their children have as a reflection of how well they raised their children (Greenfield and Marks 2006). Hence, parents may blame themselves if their children divorce, do not marry, or have no children. Third, life course transitions may affect the relationship parents have with their children either in a negative or a positive fashion. By affecting the content--and quality--of the relationship, parent's well-being may also be affected (Knoester 2003; Umberson 1992). Fourth, and finally, parents are to some extent altruistic which means that they take pleasure in the pleasures their children have and they suffer what their children suffer (Batson 1998). When a divorce of a child makes a child unhappy, this may directly make the father or mother depressed.

Previous research on such reverse intergenerational health effects is scarce. There are some studies which have focused on children's personal problems. These studies typically use cross-sectional data and show that parents with children who experienced personal problems have a higher level of depression and stress than parents of children who did not experience such problems (Greenfield and Marks 2006; Pillemer and Sutor 1991). Although the experiences of children in these studies cover a variety of problems, such as problems with drugs, money, legal matters, and health, they also include children's negative life course transitions (divorce), which at least suggests a potential for such effects to arise. Direct studies of children's life course transitions are very rare. A recent exception is a study by Milkie, Bierman, and Schieman who analyzed longitudinal data on elderly parents in a four-year interval (Milkie, Bierman, and Schieman 2008). They found no effect of children's divorce on changes in parents' level of depression. Although this is clearly the best study so far on the topic, it also had some limitations. One limitation is the relatively small sample size which reduces the statistical power to find effects of divorce. Another limitation is that no positive life course transitions were considered, such as getting married and becoming a parent.

In this paper, we analyze how children's life course transitions affect parental well-being by analyzing a large longitudinal nationally representative sample of

parents in the Netherlands. The data are called the Netherlands Kinship Panel Study (Dykstra, Kalmijn, Knijn, Komter, Liefbroer, and Mulder 2004). The parents were interviewed at two points in time about three to four years apart. Life course transitions for two randomly chosen children were recorded and parents' depression was measured in identical ways in the two waves. We test three hypotheses: (a) a child's divorce leads to a decline in parental well-being, (b) a child's union formation leads to an increase in parental well-being, and , and (c) a child's becoming a parent leads to an increase in parental well-being. In addition, we examine to what extent life course effects are due to changes in the content of the parent-child relationship. Our hypothesis is that the life course effects are explained by changes in the content of the parent-child relation. If effects are found after controlling for such changes in the relationship, this may point to other theoretical mechanisms such as altruism on the part of parents and feelings of personal failure among parents.

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