

Intergenerational transmission of attitudes towards the family: the role of family size

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Motivation

The main question we address in this study is whether congruence of family related attitudes is different in small families as compared to large families (i.e. where there are less or more children). In particular, we focus of intergenerational transmission of attitudes between parents and children, distinguishing the relations mother-daughter, father-daughter, mother-son and father-son, emphasizing the role played by sibship size.

Childbearing patterns affect the composition of values and attitudes in the population to the extent to which attitudes are transferred across generations. In fact, the importance of intergenerational transmission processes might be accentuated in the current climate of low (and lowest-low) fertility in contemporary societies.

We will discuss the mechanisms through which family size could affect the transmission of attitudes, using data from the Netherlands Kinship Panel Study (NKPS). We will in particular focus on attitudes towards the family, including gender roles and acknowledging the role of education and religiosity.

Introduction

Within the wider concept of intergenerational relations, intergenerational transmission of attitudes and behaviours has been studied in such diverse areas as gender roles (Cunningham 2001), educational attainment (Mare and Maralani 2006), fertility (Barber 2001), occupational status (Hendrickx and Ganzeboom 1998), and health (Cardol et al. 2006; Rimal 2003).

In agreement with the Principle of linked lives, individual's life experiences and trajectories are influenced by relationships with and experiences of family and peers with whom they are embedded (Elder 1977; 1994). Parents' attitudes towards behaviours influence children's attitudes in a mechanism which is usually referred to as socialization (Barber 2000; Liefbroer and de Jong Grierveld 1993). Moreover, shared experiences contribute to influence how the children want to behave and, in turn, how they do behave. For example, family size is known to

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be affected by parental family size (Axinn et al. 1994), and one reason for this could be found in congruence of attitudes encouraging large families.

From a theoretical point of view, downward transmission of attitudes may be both direct (i.e. parents purposefully teach children or children simply imitate their parents) or indirect, via contextual settings such as socio-economic status and social environments that can affect the prevailing type of attitudes (e.g. Glass, Bengtson and Dunham 1986; Schoenpflug 2001). Because it provides continuity within the family and between generations in the society, in this study we aim to identify intergenerational attitude congruence between parents and adult children, exploring the role played by family size (i.e. number of siblings). Analysing the effect of parental attitudes on children attitudes, rather than on behaviours, allows us to look at a larger spectrum as the attitudes may then affect several individual and social behaviours.

Using data from the Netherland Kinship Panel Study, we consider the main sample (where we have information on a set of family attitudes for the respondent, up to two children and a parent).

Background and hypotheses

Family ideologies contribute to a schema of available and preferable options (Swidler 1986). Families and parents in particular are regarded as the principal agents of socialization (Acock and Bengtson 1980; Moen, Erickson and Dempster-McClain 1997; Vollebergh, Iedema and Raaijmakers 2001).

A wide selection of empirical studies has looked at parental attitudes to explain children's outcomes in terms of specific behaviours (e.g. Barber et al. 2002; Barber and Axinn 1998; Kaufman 2000) or focused on the link between behaviours of the parents and behaviours of the children (e.g. Barber 2001; Murphy 1999; Murphy and Knudsen 2002; Rieken and Liefbroer 2009; Steenhof and Liefbroer 2008; see Murphy 1999 for a comprehensive review)

Prior research has also shown a substantial degree of parent-child attitude congruence (Acock and Begtson 1978; Glass et al. 1986; Miller and Glass 1989; Styskal and Sullivan 1975; Vollebergh et al. 2001). This holds even in those phases of the life course which are usually thought to bring parents' and children's opinions apart (e.g. adolescence and young adulthood).

Theorists have proposed two mechanisms of transmission of attitudes, one direct (Miller and Glass 1989; Vollebergh et al. 2001) and one indirect, through the transmission of social status and social environments (Glass et al. 1986):

1. Socialization theories (Acock and Bengtson 1980; Glass et al. 1986; Starrels and Holm 2000; Thomson 1992) suggest that parents transmit their cultural orientations directly to their children;

2. Education and religiosity affect individuals' attitudes toward a wide range of issues: higher educated have weaker feelings of obligation toward family members (Gans and Silverstein 2006), less traditional attitudes toward cohabitation, marriage (Vollebergh et al. 2001) and gender ideology (Moen et al. 1997); religious persons have stronger feelings of family obligations (Daatland and Herlofson 2003) and more traditional attitudes regarding cohabitation, marriage (Cunningham and Thornton 2005) and gender ideology (Thornton, Alwin and Camburn 1983). These differences have been explained with the specific living conditions and opportunities as well as socialization with selected social groups and contexts of people with different educational background or religiosity. De Valk and Liefbroer (2007) found strong effects of parental education and religious involvement on the preferred timing. Pearce and Thornton (2007) have shown that, although results vary across time, from early in life, mother's and children's religious characteristics shape family ideologies.

The process of socialization that has been used to explain the positive correlation of fertility patterns across successive generations, points at the importance of observational learning (Murphy and Wang 2001) and transmission of values and preferences (Thornton 1980; Barber 2000). These aspects have been mainly analysed concerning congruence on political and religious attitudes (Acock and Bengtson 1978; Miller and Glass 1989; Styskal and Sullivan 1975; Vollebergh et al 2001). Parents are also known to influence sexual attitudes (Thornton and Camburn 1987), family formation attitudes (Axinn and Thornton 1993; Trent and South 1992), attitudes toward divorce (Amato 1996), regarding fertility (Barber 2001) and gender attitudes (Cunningham 2001). Moreover, preferences towards the timing of socio-demographic events (e.g. leaving the parental home, getting married and entering parenthood) were shown to be directly related to parental preferences (De Valk and Liefbroer 2007; Steenhof and Liefbroer 2008). Due to the importance attitudes, values and beliefs hold for family and social behavior across the life course, better understanding how these ideologies are shaped teaches us more about what leads to a variety of family outcomes. We therefore investigate *the contribution of sibship size to the level of congruence in attitudes*.

Data and method

This study is based on the NKPS (Dykstra et al. 2005³). This survey is particularly feasible for our study as it is large and it is multi-actor (the data are from individual respondents as well as from family members). The main sample includes individuals residing in private homes in the Netherlands, and who are at least 18 and at most 79 years old. The sample frame is a national address sample. The survey data counts about 10,000 primary respondents (so-called 'Anchors'). 'Alters' refers to family members for whom data were collected as well: Self-completion questionnaires were mailed to the partner, a maximum of two randomly selected children aged 15 and over, a randomly selected parent, and a randomly selected sibling aged 15

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and over. This allows not only to investigate on attitude congruence between parents (i.e. the anchor) and their young children, but also between the middle generation seen as adult children (i.e. the anchor) and their elderly parents.

The dependent variable “congruence” is defined in turn as the difference between the answer of the parent and the answer of the child (in absolute values) to a series of questions on attitudes towards the family. The NKPS has a large set of questions on attitudes towards the family and gender roles. The explanatory variable refers to the number of siblings that the child has (0; 1; 2; 3; 4; 5+). Within the main sample in the first wave, the distribution by number of children is shown in Table 1:

Table 1. Sample size with at least one child, by number of children.

Number of children	Freq.	Percent	Cum.
1	1,042	18.54	18.54
2	2,602	46.29	64.83
3	1,279	22.75	87.58
4	453	8.06	95.64
5	136	2.42	98.06
6+	109	1.93	100
Total	5,621	100	

Source: NKPS 2005, Authors’elaboration.

The study will use a multivariate approach, where demographic and socio-economic characteristics of both the parent and the child are used as controls (age, gender, marital status, educational attainments, religiosity of both the parent and the child; whether the child has own children; geographical distance between the parent and the child and their frequency of interaction). For example, looking at the difference in absolute terms between the attitudes of the parent and of the child concerning the statement “two men or two women are allowed to live together”, the results (Table 2) highlight not only a key role of social mobility (i.e. whether the child has higher educational attainment than the parent), but also a significant variation in attitude congruence by sibship size: a higher number of siblings is strongly associated with less congruence (i.e. higher difference between parent’s and child’s attitudes).

Table 2. The association between number of children and congruence on the statement “two men or two women are allowed to live together”. N= 1,731

	Coef.	Std. Err.	P>t
2 children (Ref. 1 child)	0.195	0.203	0.337
3 children	0.699	0.214	0.001
4 children	0.918	0.263	0.000
5 or more children	1.184	0.307	0.000

Source: NKPS 2005, Authors’elaboration. Note: the model controls for gender and age of the parent, and education difference between the child and the parent.

Recent investigations realized the need to look at each parent individually, proposing that children’s development of attitudes is influenced more by the parent of the same gender. Although empirical support for this idea is limited (Acock 1984), we will carry out the following analysis distinguishing between fathers and mothers.

For limited space, the full list of references is not included in this long abstract.