

Diversity in Late Life – Project 5

Patterns of life-course transitions and their late-life outcomes

Patronen van transitie gedurende de levensloop en hun uitkomsten op latere leeftijd

A research project conducted at the Department of Sociology & Social Gerontology of the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam and the Netherlands Interdisciplinary Demographic Institute (NIDI) and funded by the Social Science Research Council (MaGW) of the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research (NWO) (grant 410-12-019). The project is part of the research program Diversity in Late Life.

Principal investigators

dr. P.A. Dykstra (NIDI)

dr. T.G. van Tilburg (Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam)

Concise summary of research problematic

The objective of the research project is to identify patterns in the transitions and trajectories in late life as they pertain to the domains of marriage, the family, the household, personal relationships, health, employment, and the domicile, and in the outcomes of these transitions and trajectories for late-life social embeddedness, wellbeing, health and mortality. Specific attention is paid to intra- and intercohort differences. An account for increasing heterogeneity with increasing age is sought in the identification of key life-course transition points. The project also aims to find out whether a typology can be identified that attributes the shape and course of late-life trajectories to a deliberate narrowing and a compensatory balancing of activities. Finally, an explanation for differences in late-life wellbeing is sought in differences in the degree of balance that has been achieved between older adults' life goals, the demands imposed by circumstances and available resources. The latter have been shaped by a complex interplay of people's individual life histories and the institutional context surrounding them during the course of their life time.

Scientific relevance

Multidimensional trajectories in late life that are crucial to late life diversity, have rarely been studied. A more refined description of the interconnections of transitions over time and across domains is needed to understand of the mechanisms underlying late life diversity. Both empirical and theoretically, studies are needed to evaluate its consequences for the quality of later life. As supposed by Dannefer and Uhlenberg (1999), we will search for both personological and sociological explanations (to be explained below) for multidimensional trajectories in late life. Research focusing on cohort-specific differentiation in late life still is sparse (Light, Grigsby & Bligh, 1996). Therefore, attention will be paid to intercohort as well as intracohort differences in late life diversity.

Elaboration of the problematic

This project, with its overarching research questions, is the so-called 'comprehensive' project within the program. It studies the interconnections of transitions in the life course over time and across domains, acknowledging that life transitions are embedded in trajectories (Heinz, 1991) and that status changes do not occur at random or in isolation, but have a certain structure (Mayer & Müller, 1986). Earlier studies have primarily focused on single transitions, an observation that not only holds for research on late life, but also for studies on young adulthood (Liefbroer & Dykstra, 2000). Following Dannefer and Uhlenberg (1999), the study aims to identify patterns in people's lives both at the individual level and at the level of social aggregation. In doing so, attention will be paid to inter- and intracohort differences. The emphasis on differences by cohort of birth follows from one of the central themes of the life course, namely the impact of historical times on people's lives (Elder, 1985; Hareven, 1977; Ryder, 1965). Members of a birth cohort have a shared past that reflects the historical circumstances at the time of birth, while growing up and maturing, and in the process of growing old. Cohorts have been differentially affected by economic changes (e.g. opportunities for

wealth accumulation; Van der Poel, 1998), legislative changes (e.g. bans on employment of married women and mothers; Pott-Buter, 1993), cultural changes (the rise of individualism; Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1995), and policy changes (e.g. the introduction of welfare benefits; Noordam, 1998; the expansion of extramural health and social care; Timmermans, 1987; the introduction and improvement of pension schemes). Intracohort differences reflect differential opportunities and constraints along the life course as structured by gender and social class, for example. The consideration of gender is also inspired by the 'feminization' (Arber & Ginn, 1991; Barer, 1994) of old age. The persistence of social inequities across the life course remains an open question. Though several authors have suggested that social class differences are greater in old age than in any other period in life (e.g. Dannefer, 1988; Mayer & Wagner, 1993; O'Rand, 1996), empirical evidence is scarce.

Research questions 1 and 2 inquire into life course patterns over a wide time range, spanning the entire life course. Such a long-term perspective is unique. Most life course studies focus on specific life phases: young adulthood, middle age or late life. The aim is to identify key transition points in people's lives. The inspiration comes from O'Rand (1996) who suggests that bifurcations in life courses lead to increasing heterogeneity with increasing age. Some people experience transitions in the course of their lives that serve to open doors to new challenges and opportunities. Others are confronted with changes that close off future pathways, blocking access to services and chances for advancement. O'Rand emphasizes that these bifurcations are the result of an interplay of individual decisions and institutional circumstances. *(1) Which key life-course transition points can be identified in individual life histories in the domains of marriage, the family, the household, personal relationships, health, employment and the domicile, that determine the shape of trajectories later in life? Does the occurrence, timing and sequencing of these key life-course transitions differ within and between cohorts, and if so, why? Does the identification of key life-course transition points account for increasing heterogeneity with increasing age?* The selection of the life-course transition points will be guided by considerations of experiences that are *not* part of the so-called normal expectable life course (Becker, 1997; Hagestad & Neugarten, 1985).

The project will also inquire into the long-term consequences of having experienced key life-course transitions. Empirical evidence showing that differences in 'personal history' (Antonucci & Akiyama, 1997) account for differences in late life outcomes is available, but limited. Cumulative effects of employment and family history on opportunities in late life have been demonstrated (e.g., Crystal & Währer, 1996; Elder & Liker, 1982; Henretta, 1992; de Jong Gierveld, Plomp & van Tilburg, 1997; Dykstra, 1998), suggesting that the earlier and later parts of the life course are strongly connected. Several late-life outcomes have been selected for analysis. Taken together, they can provide insight into the conditions for 'adding life to years'. Special attention will be paid to the personal network (composition, support exchanged), given that it not only reflects older adults' life history (Kahn & Antonucci, 1980; Wenger, 1989), but is also an important factor for wellbeing (e.g., Antonucci, 1990; Dykstra & Liefbroer, 1998) and mortality (Hessler, Jia, Madsen & Pazaki, 1995). *(2) In what ways are the distinguished key life-course transitions associated with social embeddedness, wellbeing, and health in late life, and how are they related to mortality? Do these associations differ between and within cohorts, and if so, why?* It is generally assumed that people whose lives have deviated from the normal expectable life course suffer harmful and enduring consequences because they were ill prepared for the changes, lacked role models, were in a deviant position relative to peers, and so forth. An alternative point of view is, however, that people who have experienced serious setbacks become particularly resourceful and resilient. According to this reasoning, there should be no harmful consequences and perhaps even beneficial effects. The objective of the analyses is to test the validity of these contrasting perspectives. In this endeavor, the links between earlier key life-course transitions and late-life outcomes will be explicated in terms of the loss and gain of personal, financial, social and health resources.

Whereas research questions 1 and 2 cover the entire life course leading up to old age, research questions 3 and 4 take a more in-depth focus on late life. The panel data are an ideal source of data for unraveling the late-life interlinkages in transitions across life domains and over time. Significant status changes occurring within the entire sample of older adults

will be traced and outlined, resulting in a typology of late-life trajectories. A recent example of a life-course typology, albeit one pertaining to women's transition to adulthood, is provided by Ravanera, Rajulton and Burch (1998). Such an example for late adulthood does not exist. In developing the typology, the objective will be to outline the *strategies* older adults follow in planning their lives, anticipating life changes and reacting to ones that have taken place. People have more or less explicit and coherent ideas about the course their life will take, and attempt to realize them (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1995; Buchmann, 1989; Giddens, 1991). People's ideas and plans for the future, as well as the extent to which they can be realized, are shaped by cultural scripts and social-structural circumstances (Foner, 1996; Hagestad & Neugarten, 1985). The structuring influence on the older adult life course of new policies, state provisions, and legislative changes (Kohli, 1985; Mayer & Müller, 1986; Mayer & Schöpflin, 1989) will also be examined. The notion that people themselves provide shape and content to their lives, is a relatively recent phenomenon. Current cohorts of older adults grew up at a time when people had a more fatalistic view of life: things just happened, and people had little control over changes in their lives (Hareven, 1977). The emphasis on individualism is relatively new, and the rising standard of living enables people to plan and organize their own lives (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1995). Older adults have not been unaffected by the rise in individualism (De Jong Gierveld, 2000).

Following Baltes and Baltes (1990) and Carstensen (1991), this project adopts the view that older adults' life strategies are characterized by selective optimization with compensation (SOC). Older adults actively and selectively begin, maintain or end pursuits, depending upon their construal of the future, the demands imposed by their circumstances and the resources available to them. Circumstantial demands and available resources are shaped by a complex interplay of the people's individual life histories and the institutional context surrounding them during the course of their life time. Within the SOC-framework, older adults' decisions about where to live, with whom to interact, what leisure-time activities to engage in, whom to help or from whom to ask help are seen as a deliberate narrowing and a compensatory balancing of activities aimed at maximizing benefits and minimizing conflicts or stress. (3) *Can a typology be identified that attributes the late-life trajectories pertaining to the domains of marriage, the family, the household, personal relationships, health, employment, and the domicile to a deliberate narrowing and a compensatory balancing of activities? Do the identified life-course types differ between and within cohorts, and if so, why?* The SOC-framework also helps explain differences in late-life wellbeing. (4) *Can differences in late-life wellbeing be attributed to differences in the degree of balance that has been achieved between older adults' life goals, the demands imposed by circumstances and available resources?*

Methods

A combination of techniques will be used to uncover key life-course transition points and their outcomes (research questions 1 and 2): event history for the analysis of the timing and occurrence of transitions, sequence analysis for the analysis of the order in which transitions occur, and (multilevel) regressions for the analysis of the outcome effects. In answering research questions 3 and 4, the analyses will be based on clustering techniques for the development of the typology and (multilevel) regressions. The data set makes it possible to disentangle cohort and aging effects by comparing, for example, respondents born in 1903 and interviewed in 1992 (T1; age 89) with those born in 1912 and interviewed in 2001 (T5; age 89).

Societal relevance

Discussions on successful aging rarely take into account the historical circumstances that have shaped and continue to shape the experiences of the present older generations. The consideration of historic specificity informs us, however, that future generations of older adults might face different challenges and obstacles in their lives. Greater insight into the interplay of institutional circumstances and individual control and behavior in shaping wellbeing, health and social embeddedness in late life, will further assist future generations to prepare for their own old age and to develop a sense of self-efficacy in the aging trajectory. Such knowledge will also aid policy makers. Changes in life course patterns can have strong

effects on the legitimacy of social policies (Thomése, 1995). It is important to avoid a mismatch between institutional arrangements and the composition of and needs in the population.

Data sources relevant to the project

A general description of the data is provided in the program proposal. Retrospective life history data (collected in LSN) and life history updates (collected in successive waves of LASA) will be used to answer research questions 1 and 2. These data have information on the parental background, educational and occupational attainment, the parenthood and marital history, and the residential history. The addition of a younger cohort in LASA will make it possible to compare older adults born at the beginning of the 20th century with those born around WW II. As regards outcomes, several indicators of health, wellbeing and social embeddedness are available. Mortality since T1 is registered and will be updated. The panel data on social embeddedness, health, residential circumstances, income, daily activities, and perceptions of the future will be used to answer research questions 3 and 4. Information on institutional, social-structural and cultural changes (i.e. changes in legislation, government policies, economic circumstances, cultural climate) will be collected through desk research.

Relevance and position of the project within the program

This project is the so-called comprehensive project of the program. Where the projects 1 to 4 mainly focus on transitions in a specific domain, this project aims at identifying the interlinkages of trajectories over time and across multiple life domains, and relating them to the specific historical context of the cohorts under study. Though interlinkages between transitions occurring in multiple domains are considered in projects 1 through 4, they are not treated in the overarching context of a series of status changes spanning all life domains. Clarification of the historic specificity is important for the appraisal of the external validity of outcomes from the other projects. In addition the general patterns of changes in social embeddedness and changes in health will be highlighted more than in the other projects. This project also integrates findings from these projects in a more general framework for understanding late life diversity, and allows for a broad description of late life changes in the general population.

Publication plan

Articles will be submitted to international and national scientific journals. The topics will be: (1) Key life-course transition points and the implications for increasing heterogeneity with increasing age, (2) Associations between key life-course transitions and later life outcomes, (3) Typology of late-life trajectories as it reflects older adults's strategies aimed at selective optimization with compensation, (4) Differences in late-life well-being as the outcome of the balance achieved between life goals, circumstantial demands and available resources, and (5) A general overview paper on cohort differences in late life diversity. Findings most specific for the Dutch situation will be reported in a Dutch journal.