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Intergenerational relations before and after offspring arrive: A within-person investigation

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ABSTRACT

The birth of a child may re-orientate the relations between adult children and their parents; however, the previous studies on the topic are both scarce and methodologically limited. The current study investigates whether younger adults' entry into parenthood (i.e., the birth of the first child) is associated with increased contact frequency, emotional closeness, intimacy and conflict with their own parents. The participants are from the German Panel Analysis of Intimate Relationships and Family Dynamics, which is a prospective survey of younger adults with six annual follow-up waves between 2009 and 2014 ($n = 17,662$ person-observations from 4821 persons). Within-person regression with a focus on each individual's variation over time was used to detect changes in intergenerational relations. The contact frequency between daughters and mothers increased after the arrival of their first child. In contrast, the emotional closeness and intimacy between sons and mothers decreased after the birth of their first child. The results are discussed with reference to gender-based differences in intergenerational relations.

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1. Introduction

In recent decades, studies concerning the relations between parents and adult children have gradually become popular in social science research (e.g., [Rossi and Rossi, 1990](#); [Szydlik, 2016](#)). Several such studies have adopted a sociological life course perspective and argued that the lives of family members are linked, which means that the relations between any two individuals in a family are always influenced by connections with others within the family (e.g., [Cox and Paley, 1997](#); [Elder, 1994](#)). Other parent-adult child relation studies have used evolutionary life history theory that concentrates on, for instance, issues related to childbearing (e.g., [Hill and Kaplan, 1999](#); [Stearns et al., 2008](#)). However, the research that investigates how becoming a parent, which is obviously one of the most significant life course events, shapes the relationships between younger adults who experience entry into parenthood (i.e., the birth of their first child) and their parents are both scarce and methodologically limited. In the present study, we investigate whether the relations between adult children and their parents change when the adult children experience the birth of their first child.

To date, few studies have directly investigated the relations between younger adults and their parents while considering the younger adults' parenthood status (but see e.g., [Chong et al., 2016](#)). Using small-scale and non-representative cross-sectional data from the US, [Fischer \(1983\)](#) found that there was more intimacy, contact and intergenerational support and less conflict among mothers and daughters with children than there was among mothers and childless daughters. [Danielsbacka et al., \(2015\)](#) investigated representative but cross-sectional data from Finland and found that parenthood was correlated with

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improved emotional closeness reported by daughters towards their own mothers (see also [Danielsbacka et al., 2017](#)). They did not find similar associations between parenthood status and emotional closeness among either between daughters and their fathers or between sons and their mothers or fathers. Perhaps the most important limitation in these previous studies is that they both used cross-sectional data, which means that one cannot claim causality based on these findings.

To provide more causal evidence, the association between the birth of a child and intergenerational relations must be studied by using longitudinal data and fixed-effect models that focus on within-person variation in exposure and exclude between-person effects ([Curran and Bauer, 2011](#); [Morgan, 2013](#)). Using within-person models, we test whether it is possible to find support for the prediction that the entry into parenthood is causally associated with relations between younger adults and their older parents. This “entry into parenthood effect on intergenerational relations” is the study theme in the present paper. We investigate this question by using a prospective survey of younger adults from Germany with six annual follow-up waves between 2009 and 2014.

2. Theoretical background

In evolutionary social science research the family is explored as a reproductive system with cooperative breeding ([Hrды, 1999, 2009](#)). In practice, cooperative breeding means that other people in addition to the biological mother participate in looking after small children. Such others are called as “allomothers,” and they often include a child's father, older siblings, grandparents, aunts and uncles. Several studies in the context of different societies have shown that in humans, grandparents are often highly involved in the life of their offspring (e.g., [Buchanan and Rotkirch, 2016](#); [Coall and Hertwig, 2010](#)).

Based on the evolutionary view, the ultimate reason for the existence of close intergenerational bonds is related to [Hamilton's \(1964\)](#) inclusive fitness theory. This theory assumes that “all else being equal”, the closer the genetic relatedness is between individuals, the closer they will feel towards one another. Individuals share, on average, 50% of their alleles with their children and 25% of their alleles with their grandchildren. Evolutionary family scholars argue that the high degree of shared alleles can be an ultimate explanation for the close relations between parents and children and between grandparents and grandchildren ([Coall and Hertwig, 2010](#); [Euler, 2011](#)).

According to the evolutionary approach, parental involvement is predicted to increase their adult children's probability of having a child, because by boosting their children's fertility, parents can increase their own inclusive fitness, i.e., spreading their genes to future generations ([Hamilton, 1964](#)). In line with evolutionary prediction, parental presence has been found to associate with increased fertility of adult children in many traditional and historical populations (see [Mace and Sear, 2005](#); [Sear and Coall, 2011](#) for reviews). In addition, some studies from contemporary nations have found that increased contact or support between adult children and parents is correlated with improved child bearing (e.g., [Tanskanen and Rotkirch, 2014](#); [Waynforth, 2012](#)), although the existing empirical evidence from present-day societies is both relatively rare and mixed. The findings on whether parental support improves the fertility of adult children in contemporary states have varied based on the type of parental involvement and the gender of both the younger adults and the parents ([Kaptijn et al., 2010](#); [Tanskanen et al., 2014](#)).

Furthermore, when one considers the evolutionary reasons behind the family relations, it is important to note that the parental behavior that may increase the parents' own inclusive fitness often has unconscious roots ([Hrды, 1999](#)). In practice, this means that when supporting their adult children, parents usually do not think about “spreading their genes” but instead follow specific cues that can, through different emotions and instincts, encourage them to provide support to their offspring ([Danielsbacka et al., 2015](#)). Evolutionary researchers argue that these emotions and instincts are proximate mechanisms that encourage evolutionary beneficial action and thus may have roots in our evolutionary past ([Salmon and Shackelford, 2011](#)).

In addition, evolutionary theory assumes that the intergenerational relations between parents and adult children are related to the existence of a common offspring because a common descendant increases the shared reproductive interests between these two generations ([Hughes, 1988](#)). It is in both generations' interest to improve the well-being of the new born child, and the family addition can link their lives closer to one another ([Euler, 2011](#)). Thus, having a child is predicted to improve intergenerational relations between adult children and their parents.

However, shared reproductive interests may not play similar roles in all parent-child dyads. Because women typically are the ones who take the main responsibility for small children ([Craig and Mullan, 2011](#); [Trivers, 1972](#)), it is likely that women will need more child related support and advice from kin than men. Furthermore, it is well known that there is a gender-based asymmetry in family relations, which means that women tend to be “kin-keepers,” or the ones who interact with relatives more than men do ([Bracke et al., 2008](#); [Dubas, 2001](#)). As a consequence, there is evidence for matrilineal bias in kin relations, which means that maternal kin are typically closer than paternal kin (e.g., [Chan and Elder, 2000](#); [Danielsbacka et al., 2011](#)). Previous studies have shown that mothers and daughters tend to share the closest ties among all of the parent-child dyads and that maternal grandparents typically invest more time and resources in their descendants than paternal grandparents do ([Euler and Michalski, 2008](#); [Hank and Buber, 2009](#)). Thus, when younger adults experience entry into parenthood, their own parents may show more interest in interacting with daughters with children compared to sons with children.

In addition, entry into parenthood may be differently associated with different intergenerational relation indicators between generations. In the present study, intergenerational relations are indicated by four measures: contact frequency, emotional closeness, intimacy and conflict. These measures are used because previous studies have shown that family relations include not only positive emotions and closeness but also disagreements and quarrels (e.g., [Fokkema et al., 2008](#);

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