

Re-assessing the importance of life-course norms in Western, individualized societies: The example of the Netherlands

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Extended abstract

1. Introduction

During the last half-century, major changes in family formation and in family life in general have occurred in Western societies. People have postponed marriage and entry into parenthood, divorce and separation have become much more wide-spread and 'new' behaviors, like unmarried cohabitation and living on one's own have emerged. These changes have been interpreted, both by demographers (e.g. Lesthaeghe, 1995; Van de Kaa, 1987) and by sociologists (e.g. Giddens, 1992, Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002) as forming a more or less coherent whole, driven by processes of secularization, individualization and modernization. The notion of the "Second Demographic Transition" has been devised to capture these changes. One of the main arguments in the theoretical discourse about the changes in young adulthood is that individual control has increased and that young adults are less dependent on normative constraints imposed by institutions like the family and the Church. One of the implications of this line of arguing seems to be that social norms loose their importance as a determinant of demographic choices.

However, the idea that social norms are loosing significance runs counter to a central tenet of life-course theory. Within the life-course paradigm, it is often emphasized that norms concerning the appropriate timing and sequencing of life events influence the behavior of those involved (Hogan & Astone, 1986; Settersten & Hagestad, 1996a, 1996b). Indeed, the work of Settersten and Hagestad on age norms suggests that a majority of people in the US still acknowledge the existence of age norms concerning a number of important life-course events. At the same time, surprisingly little research is studying the existence and importance of life-course norms. For instance, little or nothing is known about the existence of sequencing norms, and about the extent to which norms are backed up by sanctions.

Given this state of affairs, the aim of this paper is twofold. First, our aim is to rethink the potential importance of life-course norms within Western countries. Second, our aim is to provide empirical evidence on the existence of life-course norms concerning events and trajectories in the family-life domain.

2. Theory and research on life-course norms: Issues and limitations

A broad consensus exists that much past work on social norms is not very useful in understanding the importance of norms in shaping the life course in contemporary societies. Modell (1997) argues that the idea of age norms "has proven so attractive that social and behavioral scientists have tended to accept it with inadequate specification and empirical underpinning". Elder (1992) states that "we still lack knowledge of age expectations in large populations concerning events in the life course. Study of the *normative* foundation of the life course deserves far more attention than it has received so far".

One of the few publications that have touched upon the issues raised by Elder is a monographic issue of *The Gerontologist* in 1996. In that issue, Settersten and Hagestad (1996a) presented a major empirical study on the existence of age norms, based on telephone

interviews held in the Chicago Metropolitan Area. However, in the same issue, Lawrence (1996) concludes that: “age norms have been neglected in both age research and theory. A more detailed critique and study of this construct suggests it provides a rich vein for continuing theoretical and empirical development”. Moreover, research on sequencing norms is almost completely lacking until now. One may safely conclude that the empirical coverage of the topic of life-course norms lags behind the theoretical interest in the matter. However, even the theoretical interest in the issue has left us with a broad variety of different points of view (White, 1998).

The concept of norm often remains ill defined and ambiguous. This is unfortunate, because ill-defined central concepts thwart the construction of precise theories of socio-demographic behavior (Burch, 1996). In this paper, we propose an explicit definition, with clear empirical implications.

We define norms as statements:

- a. Related to the necessity (*prescription*), possibility (*permission*), or impossibility (*proscription*) of undertaking certain behaviors.
- b. Sustained by sanctions.
- c. Characteristic of a certain group of actors.

From an empirical point of view, this implies that one should investigate:

- a. The level of agreement of potential actors with a set of normative statements.
- b. The extent to which formal or informal sanctions are attached to the statements.
- c. The extent to which normative statements are specific to a certain group.

Three broad categories of social norms concerning the life course may be distinguished, i.e. age, sequencing and quantum norms. In sociological theory, “(age) norms are prescriptions or proscriptions about behavior in the form of “should” and “should not”; they are supported by consensus; and they are enforced through various mechanisms of social control, particularly social sanctions - positive, to keep people “on track”, and negative, to bring straying individuals “back into line” (Settersten & Mayer, 1997)”. It is possible to distinguish between appropriate ages or optimal age norms, and upper and lower limit ages for specific events (defined as ‘cultural age deadlines’ by Settersten and Hagestad [1996a,b] or ‘goal deadlines’ by Heckhausen [1999]). Sequencing norms concern the order in which two (or more) events occur in the life course. Heckhausen (1999) states that future research on social norms within the life course framework has to focus on sequencing prescriptions. Sequencing has indeed largely been neglected in the recent literature on norms on life course events. Quantum norms refer to the number of times a certain event should or should not be experienced. Again, it is possible to distinguish between an appropriate number and upper and lower limits. One of such quantum norms, i.e. norms with respect to the number of children, has been extensively studied in demography (see e.g. the review of Oppenheim Mason, 1983).

An important issue in the discussion on the role of norms in life-course research is whether expectations are or have to be backed up by sanctions in order to be considered norms (e.g. Marini, 1984; White, 1996). Some people argue that expectations do not necessarily have to be sustained by sanctions. Even if no sanctions are attached to them, expectations about appropriate behavior may still be fundamental in shaping the life course of individuals, by providing internal calendars or scripts that orient behavior (Buchmann, 1989; Meyer, 1988). From a developmental psychology perspective, Heckhausen (1999) states that the effect of social norms may have been internalized in Western societies, and this renders obsolete any need for external societal enforcement. She concludes that “life-course patterns would be

expected to have become increasingly regulated by internalised norms about age-appropriate behaviour, age-graded events and transitions, and age-sequential rules (e.g. you must finish school first before you can have a family) as societal regulation became more lenient.” Such age-calendars may even include ideas regarding the length of life. In our opinion, the notions of ‘norms’ and ‘scripts’ are not necessarily mutually exclusive. People may hold *general* ideas about the suitable timing and sequence of life-course events, and at the same time sanction only transgressions of *specific* age and sequence norms.

Event if sanctions are attached to life-course expectations, one could ask what kind of sanctions this would be. Although sanctions could be positive (rewarding norm-abiding behavior), negative sanctions are more fundamental to the concept of social norm (while negative sanctions would refrain people from acting against the norm). Three general types of negative sanctions can be distinguished. These are:

- a. Sanctions of a social nature. This type of sanctions usually is relatively mild, like small remarks at parties or being mocked at by others. However, strong sanctions can sometimes occur as well, like being questioned about one’s deviant behavior, or being ostracized by one’s social network.
- b. Sanctions of a material nature. This type of sanctions is usually the prerogative of actors that hold some power, like parents who can withdraw financial or instrumental support from their children.
- c. Legal sanctions. Many legal rules and regulations impinge on the individual life course. Examples are the legal minimum age at leaving school and regulations concerning retirement and early retirement schemes. In many instances, legal rules allow a broad latitude to individuals concerning timing and sequencing of life-course events.

Our focus is on the presence of absence of social and material sanctions (cf. Oppenheim Mason, 1983; Marini, 1984; Settersten and Hagestad, 1996a, 1996b). We also pay some attention to the people who are responsible for sanctioning, sometimes called ‘defenders’ of norms (Conte and Castelfranchi, 1995). In particular, we ask to what extent parents are among the ‘defenders’.

Social norms need not be shared by the society as a whole. Usually, such norms will be shared within specific social networks or social categories. People’s behavior will probably be influenced specifically by norms existing in the social networks or social categories they either belong to or aspire to belong to— so-called reference groups. This might be particularly true with respect to social norms on the life course of individuals. In empirical analyses, one can make a distinction between the social categories people belong to (age, cohort, educational stratum, social class) and the particular groups of which people are a member (family, peer group, neighbourhood, colleagues). We will focus on differences in norms between social categories.

Based on these considerations, we use data from a representative survey among Dutch adults to answer the following questions:

- a. Do people think that age, sequencing, and quantum norms exist, and if so, what is their content?
- b. What kind of sanctions do people feel are attached to transgressing certain norms?
- c. To what extent do social categories differ in their views on norms and sanctions?

3. Data

We use data from the Population and Policy Acceptance Survey (PPA) held in the Netherlands in 2000. The PPA is a survey held regularly in the Netherlands. In it people are

asked about their opinions about population issues and about policies that have a direct or indirect bearing on population developments. In the 2000 wave of the PPA a special module was devoted to measuring life-course norms.

Using data from the Netherlands is particularly interesting because the Netherlands is one of the countries in which new family behaviors (like unmarried cohabitation, postponement of marriage and childbearing) have spread relatively rapidly (Liefbroer, 2005). In addition, it is considered to be, culturally, a very liberal and individualized country. This makes the Netherlands a perfect setting to test whether norms are still extant in a thoroughly individualized society.

The PPA is a computer-assisted self-administered questionnaire (CASAQ), completed by participants in a long-term panel maintained by a non-profit, university-based data-collection agency. 1833 respondents from 1260 different households completed the questionnaire. To avoid problems of non-independence in the data, one respondent from each household was randomly selected for the analyses. After dropping cases with missing values, 1083 respondents remained. A comparison was made between the sample and the total population on age, sex, marital status and region. The young, the unmarried and women were underrepresented. The age-category 45-64 was overrepresented. Weighting was used to correct for this bias.

Life-course norms about appropriate behavior of men and women may differ. To accommodate to this fact, we used a split-ballot design. A randomly selected half of the respondents got the questions on age-, sequencing- and quantum-norms referring to the behavior of women, whereas the other half got the same questions referring to men.

4. Results

With regard to age-norms, a first indication of whether norms exist is whether or not people feel that one can be too young or too old to experience a transition. If nobody feels that this is the case, a norm is clearly absent. Therefore, respondents were asked whether they thought a lower or an upper age limit existed for several family-related behaviors, and if so, what age constituted this limit. More specifically, we asked about the upper limit for leaving home, the lower limit for starting to live with a partner and both the lower and upper limit for having a child. Given that different norms may apply to men and women, half of the respondents were asked whether they thought an age norm existed for women, whereas the other half were asked whether they thought an age norm existed for men. Table 1 presents results on this issue. Almost all respondents (95% or more) acknowledge the existence of a lower age limit for living with a partner and an upper and a lower age limit for having a child. The mean age given as a lower limit for entry into a union is 19 years for men and 18 years for women. The mean age given as a lower limit for having a child is 20 for men and 19 for women. The mean age given as an upper limit for childbearing is 47 for men and 42 for women. Clearly, norms about when men and women can be considered too young to start family formation and too old to continue it still exist in the Netherlands. This is less clear with regard to leaving home. About three quarters of the respondents think that an upper limit to leaving home exist. The mean age limit given is 26 years for women and 27 for men.

Table 1 and Table 2 about here

Next, respondents were asked whether they thought an upper limit to the number of children men and women should have existed (a quantum norm). Table 2 shows that a small majority of the respondents thought so. The mean maximum number of children was slightly below four.

Table 3 about here

People may not only hold norms on the appropriate age at which an event should be experienced, but also on whether an event should occur at all (e.g. divorce), in what sequence the event should occur (e.g. leaving home, unmarried cohabitation and marriage), and whether certain family roles should be combined or not. We asked respondents to what extent they approved or disapproved of a set of demographically relevant behaviors. If a substantial fraction of the respondents disapprove of a certain type of behavior, this suggests the existence of a norm. Respondents could give their reaction on a five-point scale. In Table 3, responses were collapsed into three categories (approval, a neutral stance, disapproval). This way of measuring norms leaves some room for discussion. Does a norm exist if the majority disapproves of a behavior, or does the existence of only a minority approving of that behavior already constitute evidence for the existence of a norm? If one uses the first (strong) definition, just one norm emerges. Respondents disapprove of men being a single father. If one takes the second (weak) definition of a norm, a larger number of norms exist. Less than half of the respondents approve of men and women being a single mother, of women combining a full-time job and young children and of men and women divorcing while they have young children. In addition, it is interesting to note that some respondents do not only disapprove of 'modern' behaviors (like having a child while cohabiting), but also of 'traditional' behaviors (like marriage without prior cohabitation), suggesting that the content of norms can change over time. Finally, the large difference in the approval of combining young children and a full-time job for men and women, testifies to the fact that a considerable gender gap in this issue still exists in the Netherlands.

Table 4 about here

To ascertain whether people thought sanctions were attached to norms transgression, and if so, what kind of sanctions, we selected four behaviors that we thought might lead to considerable, but differing, levels of disapproval. For each of these four behaviors, we asked how often people thought that specific kind of sanctions would be applied. In Table 4, the percentage of respondents who thought that specific kind of sanctions would frequently or often occur is presented. The results show that respondents thought that divorce while having young children was sanctioned most heavily, followed by divorce while there are no young children around and single motherhood. Fewest sanctions were expected for the strong postponement of motherhood.

Gossiping was considered the kind of sanction to occur most often. For instance, almost 85% of the respondents thought that people would gossip about a couple with children who had divorced. Other types of social sanctions like parents showing their disapproval and people making cursory remarks were also mentioned quite often. A reduction of material support by parents and the avoidance of the transgressors by others were thought less likely. Still, even these relatively hard sanctions were thought to occur frequently by a small minority of the respondents.

Table 5 about here

Finally, it was analyzed whether ideas about norms and sanctions differed between social categories. The results presented above clearly suggest that at least some life-course norms still operate in a thoroughly modernized setting. Proponents of the Second Demographic Transition thesis, however, would suggest that such norms will mainly be present among tradition-minded segments of the population, like the old, the low educated and the religious, whereas they will virtually be absent among the more modern strata of the society. To study this issue, we examined the extent to which the presence of norms differs between the young and the old, the low and highly educated and the religious and the non-religious. Social differences were clearly smallest for the questions on sanctions, somewhat larger for questions on age and quantum norms and by far the largest for questions on norms concerning the sequencing and combination of family roles and events. The strongest gender differences occurred with regard to the sequencing norms. Men were more disapproving of single parenthood, unmarried parenthood, unmarried cohabitation, and divorce (with and without children) than women. Men also perceived stronger sanctions on divorce with children than women did. Religiousness and level of education show quite opposite patterns with regard to sequencing norms. Disapproval of single parenthood increases with level of education, but decreases with level of religiousness. This same kind of opposing pattern is visible for unmarried parenthood, unmarried cohabitation, marriage without cohabitation, a woman combining a job and children and divorce. The higher educated respondents are the less they endorse norms about traditional behavior, but the more they endorse norms concerning modern behavior, like the necessity to cohabit before marriage and to live alone before entry into a union. The more religious respondents are, the more they endorse norms concerning traditional behavior and the less they endorse norms about modern behavior. Older respondents generally held stronger sequencing and combination norms than younger respondents.

5. Discussion

This paper has shown that social norms concerning family life behavior are still relevant, also when one refers to a society that is fairly advanced in terms of “Second Demographic Transition”. With regard to some events, social norms that are widely shared within society and are widely backed up by sanctions still exist. People discern clear age-norms regarding entry into a union and regarding the timing of childbearing. Clear norms also exist with regard to divorce. With regard to other events, there is less consensus on the existence of social norms, and the proponents of the “Second Demographic Transition” thesis seem right in assuming that these norms are being relaxed and are mainly alive among the more-traditionally oriented strata of society. With the dwindling of their numbers, these norms will probably become less important as well. However, even highly educated and secularized people in the Netherlands still endorse some norms. Moreover, there is also some evidence on the rise of new social norms. It might well be that, with the spread of new family life behaviors, these new behaviors themselves will become normative.

Another important finding from this study is that a variety of sanctions is thought to be related to the transgression of life-course norms. Clearly, sanctions like gossiping and making cursory remarks are very mild in nature, but such sanctions may still have some effect on people's likelihood to transgress norms. People think it is less likely that more serious sanctions, like withdrawing support or avoiding people will be enforced. However, non-marginal minorities feel that these sanctions are likely when people transgress family-related norms.

This study could not address the full range of life-course norms, but concentrated on those in the family-life domain. Obviously, attention to other norms is warranted as well. Another important issue is whether there is cross-cultural variation in the existence and importance of these norms. In particular, it would be interesting to study whether these norms are stronger in societies that are less individualized than the Netherlands. Finally, norms are thought to have an impact on people's behavior. Research on the question whether norms or the perception of norms actually influences the life-course behavior of men and women is needed to find out whether this is true. Such studies ask for a panel design in which perceived norms are measured before the actual behavior occurs.

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Tables

Table 1 Information on age limits for family related events

	For men		For women	
	% acknowledging the existence of an age limit	Mean age limit	% acknowledging the existence of an age limit	Mean age limit
Upper age limit for leaving home	76.2	26.7	69.6	26.1
Lower age limit for living with a partner	96.0	18.8	96.2	18.3
Lower age limit for having a child	98.0	20.0	99.1	19.2
Upper age limit for having a child	95.5	46.7	96.2	42.3

Table 2 Information on quantum limits for family related events

	For men		For women	
	% acknowledging the existence of a quantum limit	Mean quantum limit	% acknowledging the existence of a quantum limit	Mean quantum limit
Upper limit for number of children	58.4	3.8	60.0	3.9

Table 3 Information on norms for sequencing and combining family related events

	For men			For women		
	% approving	% neutral	% disapproving	% approving	% neutral	% disapproving
Having a child while being single	17.1	22.9	60.0	27.8	33.8	38.4
Having a child without being married	48.2	27.8	24.0	54.7	27.4	17.8
Cohabitation without prior independent living	54.7	29.8	15.5	55.0	28.9	16.1
Unmarried cohabitation	81.5	11.3	7.3	78.7	16.1	5.3
Marriage without prior cohabitation	64.3	26.0	9.6	64.2	22.7	13.1
Combining a full-time job and young children	69.2	16.5	14.2	32.3	22.5	45.2
Divorce in the absence of young children	51.3	38.2	10.5	51.1	40.2	8.8
Divorce in the presence of young children	22.7	30.4	46.3	21.4	29.8	48.7

Table 4 Percentage of respondents who feel a specific type of sanction will frequently or often occur, by type of behaviour

Sanction	Type of behaviour			
	Divorce without children	Divorce with young children	A single woman having a child	Strong postponement of parenthood
People gossiping	69.2	84.8	80.2	26.4
People making cursory remarks	33.0	48.1	41.3	24.3
People trying to persuade person to change mind	20.3	42.2	27.0	9.6
People starting to avoid the person	19.5	28.9	11.0	2.3
Parents showing their disapproval	53.5	68.1	48.7	21.2
Parents reducing help or financial assistance	20.0	17.5	11.0	4.9

Table 5 Overview of significant effects of background variables on norms and sanctions (based on analyses of variance with all four independent variables included)

Item	Variable			
	Gender	Level of education	Religiousness	Age
Existence of upper age limit leaving home	-	+	0	-
Mean upper age limit of leaving home	0	-	0	-
Existence of lower age limit cohabitation	0	0	0	0
Mean lower age limit of cohabitation	-	0	+	U
Existence of lower age limit childbearing	0	0	0	0
Mean lower age limit childbearing	0	+	0	0
Existence upper age limit childbearing	0	0	0	0
Mean upper age limit childbearing	-	0	0	U
Existence norm on maximum nr of children	+	0	0	+
Mean maximum number of children	-	+	+	-
Disapproval of single parenthood	+	-	+	+
Disapproval of unmarried parenthood	+	-	+	+
Disapproval of skipping living alone	0	+	+	+
Disapproval of unmarried cohabitation	+	-	+	+
Disapproval of marriage without prior cohab	0	+	-	0
Disapproval of a woman combining job+kids	0	-	+	0
Disapproval of a man combining job+kids	0	0	0	-
Disapproval of divorce without children	+	-	+	+
Disapproval of divorce with young children	+	-	+	+
Sanctions on divorce without children	+	0	0	-
Sanctions on divorce with young children	0	0	0	0
Sanctions on single motherhood	0	0	0	0
Sanctions on late parenthood	0	0	0	0

A + for gender implies a stronger effect for men, a - a stronger effect for women

A U means a U-shaped effect