The role of parents in their adult children’s housing and residential locations
Smits, A.W.M.

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CHAPTER

CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

6
6.1 BACKGROUND AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This study of the role of parents in their adult children’s residential choice (behaviour with respect to housing quality and residential location) deals with the societal issues of social inequality and intergenerational solidarity. Although they have received substantial attention from scholars throughout the 20th and early 21st century, few studies on social inequality or intergenerational solidarity have focused on residential choice.

The aim of this book was to investigate the role of parents in their adult children’s residential choice. The main research question was: To what extent do parents play a role in their adult children’s housing and residential locations, and how far can this role be explained by intergenerational continuities and family solidarity?

The first two chapters of this book deal with the question of the extent to which housing quality is transmitted from parents to children. The quality of housing can be seen as an outcome of social status inheritance. Having wealthier parents might therefore be associated with having higher-quality housing, because wealthier parents might have stimulated their child(ren) to obtain it. Having wealthier parents might also be directly associated with higher-quality housing, because wealthier parents have better financial means for providing their children with gifts and loans, useful for obtaining it. Any evidence this study may provide for such associations will imply that existing inequalities on the housing market are being reproduced across generations. In Chapter 2 of this book, I report my study of the extent to which the transition to first-time homeownership can be explained by parents’ homeownership, and whether this influence has changed over time. In Chapter 3, I deal with a measure of housing quality that has never previously been used in studies on the transmission of housing quality between parents and their adult children. This measure is the value of housing (or WOZ, referring to the Valuation of Immovable Property Act or, in Dutch, wet Waardering Onroerende Zaken), which is used in the Netherlands as a basis for property taxation.

In the next two chapters, I describe the effect of family solidarity on the residential locations of parents and children. Based on the idea that people with support needs choose their place of residence partly according to where their parents or adult children live, I expected to find associations between situations and events related to support needs on the one hand and moves in the direction of parents and children on the other. Any evidence my study may provide of such associations will generate new insights into the importance of solidarity between generations and the role of the proximity of kin living outside the household. In Chapter 4, I first report my investigation of the extent to which situations and events associated with greater support needs account for intergenerational coresidence (children aged 30 and over living together with their parents). In a second step, I studied what situations and events influence the transition to intergenerational coresidence (which can be the result of a move of one of the generations into the other’s home, or both generations moving into a new home) and who, under what circumstances, is likely to move in with whom when the transition is made. In Chapter 5, I describe parents’ moves close to their adult child and adult children’s
moves close to their parents. In contrast with previous studies, where moves close to kin could not be disentangled from moves resulting in coresidence with kin (Pettersson & Malmberg, 2009) or where it was not clear how close to their parents children finally lived (Michielin, Mulder & Zorlu, 2008), I studied moves that resulted in a maximum distance of one kilometre. The aim of the study reported in Chapter 5 was to investigate to what extent situations and events associated with parents’ and their children’s support needs influence the likelihood of moving close to each other, and who, under what circumstances, is most likely to move close.

6.2 SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Intergenerational transmission of housing quality
Chapter 2 contains evidence of the existence of the intergenerational transmission of homeownership. An adult who, as a child aged fifteen, had home-owning parents was more likely to make the transition to first-time homeownership. The association between parental homeownership and the transition to first-time homeownership held even after controlling for parental education. In Chapter 2, it was also revealed that parental homeownership gained importance slightly for the odds of becoming a homeowner between 1970 and 2003, indicating that for later generations, having grown up in an owner-occupied home became more influential in the transition to first-time homeownership. In contrast, the role of household status became decreasingly important through the last three decades of the twentieth century: the strong positive effects of being married and marrying decreased, whereas those of being single, cohabiting, and starting cohabitation became correspondingly stronger. In summary, on the owner-occupied market, the differences between those who grew up in rented and owner-occupied homes have slightly increased, whereas the differences between people of different household types have decreased.

In Chapter 3, a new measure of housing quality was introduced: housing value (WOZ). This measure of housing quality is more thorough than, for instance, tenure or size, and is available for rented as well as owner-occupied dwellings. A strong association was found between parents’ and children’s housing value, even after controlling for several indicators of the parents’ and the child’s socioeconomic status. Consequently, the effect of parental housing value on that of their adult children could not be explained by the fact that wealthier parents have wealthier children as a result of the parent’s greater means for directly or indirectly investing in their children. The remaining association might be explained by unobserved assets through which parents might directly help their children obtain higher-value housing, or by a role-modelling process that stimulates children to obtain high-value housing. The association between the parents’ and the child’s housing value was found to be stronger for parents and children who live close to each other. This finding is similar to the finding that in Italy, the closer adult children live to their parents, the more financial housing support they receive from them (Tomassini et al., 2003). Thus, in the Netherlands, living close also facilitates the exchange of
support and contact and might result in more financial support from parents. Housing value was considered to be not only partially the outcome of the intergenerational transmission of socioeconomic status, but also a robust indicator of people’s socioeconomic status. Other than income, the value of housing reflects not only people’s current socioeconomic position, but also their entire socioeconomic histories.

Family solidarity and residential locations
The expectation that support-related situations and events in people’s lives are associated with moves in the direction of parents or adult children was confirmed in the studies reported in Chapters 4 and 5. In Chapter 4 adult children were reported to be more likely to live together with parents when they were divorced, widowed or received a long-term disability benefit. Moves of an adult child into the parents’ home were more likely after a child’s divorce or a child’s loss of income, and moves of an adult child into a mother’s home were more likely after the mother’s divorce. Moves in the opposite direction – those of parents into an adult child’s home – were more likely after the parents’ divorce. When an adult child had a partner living in the household or a stepparent living in the parent’s household, coresidence and transitions to coresidence were less likely. This finding was explained from the fact that having a partner in the household might decrease the need for support from other family members and increase the need for privacy. The presence of children in an adult child’s household was also found to play a part in the transition to intergenerational coresidence. Never-married singles with children were more likely to live with parents and move in with them than married people without children were. This finding is in line with Hank & Buber’s (2009) study of European grandparents caring for their grandchildren. They found that the likelihood of childcare decreased with increasing geographic distance between parents and their adult child, and that receiving childcare from grandparents was particularly likely for adult children living without a partner.

The presence of children in the adult child’s household and, possibly, the need for childcare was also an important predictor of moves close to parents and moves of parents close to an adult child, as was shown in Chapter 5. Where intergenerational coresidence implies a loss of privacy for both generations, parents and children who live close to each other, but not together, do not experience a privacy loss. Instead, living close together facilitates the exchange of care and keeping in contact. In Chapter 5, I reported that adult children who had recently had their first child were more likely than childless adult children to move close to parents, although these moves were not more likely than moves elsewhere. When an adult child had children more than one year old living in the household, moves close to parents and moves elsewhere were less likely than when there were no children in the adult child’s household. Interestingly, the analyses revealed that the presence of children older than one in an adult-child’s household was associated with moves of the parents close to the adult child. These moves were even more likely than moves elsewhere. It is possible that such moves of
parents close to their adult child are related to the adult child’s need for childcare, but it is also possible that parents want to be near their grandchildren in order to see them regularly. Moves of parents close to their adult child were also more likely (and even more likely than moves elsewhere) when the adult child was female or an only child. When parents had a disability benefit, moves close to an adult child were also more likely than when parents were employed, but these moves were not more likely than moves in a different direction. Other findings reported in Chapter 5 indicate that, for adult children, being divorced as well as the event of divorce increased the likelihood of moving close to their parents. These moves were even more likely than moves elsewhere. When parents already had a child living close, they were less likely to move away from their residential area, but they had a higher chance of having another child moving nearby. Thus, the presence of parents and siblings in a certain area might serve as mobility attractions for an adult child. This finding is in line with Pettersson & Malmberg’s (2009) finding that in Sweden, moving close to elderly parents or an adult child is more likely when other family members also live close.

In both chapters, support-related situations and events are associated with moves of a person in need in the direction of the other generation: children with increased support needs are extra likely to move towards parents, and parents with increased support needs are extra likely to move towards an adult child. The situation in which parents move close to an adult child with children older than one year in the household might be an exception to this rule, although it is possible that these parents move close to fulfil their own ‘need’: the wish to see their grandchildren.

6.3 CONTRIBUTIONS OF THIS RESEARCH

The research reported in this book extends previous research in several ways. First, I was able to investigate recent changes in the effects of household events and parental homeownership on the likelihood of becoming a homeowner. That household composition and parental homeownership are important factors for the transition to first-time homeownership had already been established in previous studies. However, the effects of these characteristics were likely to have changed throughout the last few decades. The use of the Netherlands Kinship Panel Study allowed me to study these changes and yielded new insights into the changing roles of household composition and parental homeownership in the transition to becoming a homeowner.

Second, I had the opportunity to investigate the intergenerational transmission of housing quality using a unique measure of the quality of housing: housing value (WOZ). This measure has not been used before in studies of the intergenerational transmission of housing quality and refers not only to housing size and tenure (indicators of housing quality used in previous research on the intergenerational transmission of housing quality), but also to the year in which the dwelling was built and renovated, the type of dwelling, and neighbourhood characteristics.
A third contribution of this book is the study of the transition to intergenerational coresidence. In the early 1990s, coresidence between adult children and their parents became the subject of an increasing number of studies (see White, 1994, for an overview). Only a few of these studies concentrated on adult children’s returns to the nest, and studies on moves of parents into the adult child’s home were also underrepresented in academic research for a long time. Choi (2003) was, to my knowledge, the first to address the question of who moves in with whom and for what reason: to help the parents, the adult child or both. Choi’s study provided a better understanding of how intergenerational households are formed. Her study, however, used retrospective data to investigate who moved in with whom, and did not incorporate events that might have preceded the transition to coresidence. The SSB allows for the inclusion of events, even those that rarely take place (such as the widowhood of an adult child) and facilitates the investigation of the effect of these events on the transition to coresidence.

Finally, this book contributes to the existing knowledge of residential mobility and intergenerational proximity with a study on moves close to parents and children. In particular, it is the definition of these moves that can be regarded as a novelty in research on residential mobility and intergenerational proximity. Previous studies have focused on converging moves (moves in which the distance between parents and children decreases), without knowing the final distance between them (Michielin, Mulder & Zorlu, 2008), or moves to within an area 50 kilometres square or even of 100 metres square (Pettersson & Malmberg, 2009), without knowing whether parents and children live together or apart. In Chapter 5, I define moves close to parents and children as moves to within 1 kilometre. With this distance criterion, it is plausible to assume that the move is associated with the presence of kin rather than with other motives for moving.

6.4 REFLECTION ON THE DATA AND METHODS

The NKPS data are characterized by the great possibilities they offer for the investigation of family ties. Respondents are linked not only to their parents, but also to their grandparents, children, and other family members. Unfortunately, the data include only limited information on housing quality and residential choice. The SSB data have many advantages over the NKPS data, but the SSB also comprises several issues that one does not have to contend with when working with the NKPS (or other surveys). The first issue is that administrative data are not collected primarily for academic research and therefore contain different information. Where surveys are designed primarily to answer specific research questions, administrative data are collected for different purposes and do not always allow these questions to be answered. In both types of data measurement errors appear, but they differ in nature, at least in the extent to which they are detected. Survey interviews allow for the correction of errors as soon as an interviewer realizes that a given answer is incorrect. Amendment is not possible in
administrative data; errors in these are only discovered when a mistake has consequences for
the person to whom it pertains (for example, when taxes are unreasonably high). At the same
time, survey data are sensitive to nonresponse and their quality depends, among other things,
on the motivation and honesty of the respondent.

The second issue regarding the use of the SSB concerns the selectivity of parent-child
dyads. Although it includes information on the whole Netherlands’ population, tracing back
the parents of all individuals in the SSB was not possible. In some cases, both parents had
already died by October 1994, when the Netherlands’ municipalities combined their registers
in one database. Record linkage was possible when the parent and child had ever lived in the
same municipality after October 1994, or, failing that, the dates of birth of both parents were
known, which was the case had the parents ever married and were both alive in October 1994.
Consequently, older birth cohorts are underrepresented in the parent-child data, while parents
and children who live in the same municipality are overrepresented. In Chapters 3, 4, and 5
the analyses drawing on SSB data are described; several selections were applied to overcome
the danger of data selectivity. It should be mentioned that the results of these analyses are
therefore restricted to a selective population and so cannot be considered representative of
the entire Netherlands population. The results reported in Chapter 3 pertain to adult children
living outside the household, who were not institutionalized and were not enrolled in full-time
education, aged 25 and over, and having at least one parent, not older than 75, living in the
Netherlands in 2003. Chapter 4 concentrates on adult children aged 30 to 40, living outside the
parental household, whose parents were both alive in 1995 and who had at least one parent
alive in 2005. In Chapter 5, I dropped the upper age criterion and selected adult children, aged
30 and over, living outside the parental household, whose parents were both alive in 1995 and
who had at least one parent alive in 2005. Although some caution in generalizing the results
seems warranted, the findings provide clear insight into the way in which housing quality and
residential locations are shaped by parental influence.

Third, because the SSB data were not collected primarily for the purpose of scientific
research, working with them was more time consuming than with the NKPS data. The
indicators deemed necessary to capture certain characteristics were not always available in the
desired form. In these situations, the administrative concept for which the register was set up
differed from the statistical concept required for testing my hypotheses (see Bakker, 2009, for
a discussion of administrative and statistical concepts). An example is a person’s household
situation. The SSB contains information on people’s marital status (at the individual level)
and on their household composition (constructed on the basis of all registrations at the same
address), but neither of these administrative concepts includes any registrations of cohabiting
people. In order to construct a measure of household situation including cohabiting couples,
both concepts were therefore combined. Cross-tabulations of marital status and household
composition then revealed that people who were registered as never-married singles could be
classified as cohabiters, for example when they were registered as living together with their
children and the other parent. Extra checks on the age difference between two ‘cohabiting’ persons were performed to ensure that it was plausible that these persons were indeed living as a couple rather than as housemates. Needless to say, survey data, in which respondents were asked about their household situation, would be much more straightforward.

An important indicator that was not included in the SSB is the level of education of parents and their children. Instead of a full registration of completed level of education, the SSB includes information on adults who completed higher vocational or university education in the Netherlands from 1986 onwards. This measure of level of education was used in the study reported in Chapter 4. In the other chapters containing analyses using SSB data, ‘level of education’ was not included in the models because it was not yet available for research at the time these chapters were written.

The fourth issue regarding the SSB data is the fact that the SSB does not contain information on people’s actual support needs. Such information can easily be gathered in survey research, where questions on activities of daily living (ADL) capture the extent to which people are able to take care of themselves and whether they need help from people living in or outside the household (see for example Choi, 2003; Hank, 2007). Throughout the research process I came across hospital registrations, also gathered by Statistics Netherlands but not included in the SSB data. In the Netherlands, each hospital visit is registered with the person’s date of birth, gender, and six-digit postal code. As a result of this procedure, many of the registered visits could refer to more than one person, particularly in densely-populated areas. Selecting only those registrations that referred to only one person would have implied a loss of millions of cases. Thus, instead of using information on people’s actual support needs, I made the assumption that they were associated with several situations and events included in the analyses. In addition to the limitations mentioned above, working with the SSB caused some technical difficulties as a result of the large size of the dataset. Relatively simple data transformations sometimes took more than 3 hours instead of the 3 minutes needed when transforming NKPS data.

The last issue that I want to address here is the interpretation of the magnitude of the effects in register-based studies. Steenhof and Liefbroer (2008: pp. 75) argued that, although not all children could be linked to their parents, the SSB data are population data rather than sample data, which makes significance testing unnecessary. To distinguish the stronger from the weaker effects, one could then use t scores or p values, but in a large dataset such as the SSB probably almost all variables would be statistically significant. In their study, Steenhof and Liefbroer used a classification of t values in which ‘negligible’ effects (t<2) were separated from ‘weak’ (2<t<10), ‘moderate’ (10<t<20) and ‘strong’ effects (t>20). Because I used strict selection criteria (in Chapters 3, 4, and 5) and analysed relatively rare situations (in Chapter 4) and transitions (in Chapters 4 and 5), I decided to report significance levels in my analyses, using p < 0.001 and p < 0.005 as the test criteria.
6.5 REFLECTION ON THE FINDINGS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

The results of this research provide new insights into the continuing discussion with regard to social inequality and intergenerational solidarity. A longstanding tradition of sociological research has shown that modernization is accompanied by the shift from ascription (the effect of the parents’ socioeconomic status on that of the child) to achievement (the effect of the child’s level of education on the child’s socioeconomic status) (Ganzeboom & Luijkkx, 2004; Ganzeboom & Treiman, 2007). My study has indicated that this shift does not apply to all areas of status attainment. Even in a modern society such as the Netherlands, ascription in first-time homeownership has gained slightly in importance through the past few decades. This finding calls for more attention to be paid to the role of ascription in other housing outcomes.

My study has also provided further evidence for the assumption that support from parents to children seems to be the most frequent form of intergenerational solidarity (see also: Rossi & Rossi, 1990; Ward et al., 1992). Despite the limitations of my study (such as the lack of information on actual support exchange), intergenerational solidarity indeed seems to be concentrated on parent-to-child support rather than the other way around.

Based on the results reported in this book, some suggestions can be made to enrich the knowledge on housing quality, residential locations, and the role of parents. The first suggestion is to widen the scope of research from a national to an international perspective. The Netherlands context differs substantially from other European and non-European contexts with respect to housing-market characteristics, geographical distances, and cultural values. This study does not address this issue, although other recent studies have shown that such differences do exist (Brandt, Haberkern & Szydlik, 2009; Giuliano, 2008; Hank, 2007; Liefbroer & Fokkema, 2008). Further research is necessary to reveal how these contextual differences determine the extent to which parents play a role in their adult children’s residential choice. An important study that has revealed some of the contextual differences and the way they influence intergenerational proximity and contacts is Hank’s (2007) comparison of ten European countries. An interesting complement to this study would be the investigation of moves close to parents or adult children. It is likely that national institutions play a role in the extent to which parents and children seek support from each other. My finding that parents move close to an adult child when the adult child has children more than one year old living in the household, for instance, might not be found in such countries as Norway and Sweden where childcare facilities are arranged by national institutions. One study addressed the difference between the effect of parental homeownership on the transition to first-time homeownership in the Netherlands and former West-Germany (Mulder & Wagner, 1998), but as yet there is no clear overview of whether the intergenerational transmission of housing quality also operates in other countries. Again, national institutions are likely to explain differences between countries in the intergenerational transmission of housing quality.
A second suggestion for further research is to investigate whose parents are more influential in the residential choice of couples: his parents or hers? Some work in this direction has already been done by Blaauboer, Mulder & Zorlu (2008), who studied the distances between couples and both of their parents, but more studies could be carried out of the role of parents in a couple’s residential choice. An example would be the investigation of receiving parental housing assistance. When adult children receive help from their parents in order to purchase or renovate a home, whose parents are more likely to give help? In addition, the effect of geographical distance could be an influential determinant of receiving parental housing support.

Third, my analysis of (transitions to) intergenerational coresidence revealed substantial gender differences in the extent to which support-related events result in coresidence with parents. The differences found lead to further questions: Who are more likely, under what circumstances, to make the transition to intergenerational coresidence: men or women? This issue could also be addressed when studying moves close to parents and children.

A fourth suggestion for further research is also concerned with the study of intergenerational coresidence. Although new insight into (transitions to) coresidence was gained from the cross-sectional and longitudinal analyses reported in Chapter 4, who, and under what circumstances, moves in with parents or adult children for only a short time is still unclear. My analysis did not allow for a further investigation of the length of stay in the intergenerational household. Future studies could usefully address this issue.

REFERENCES

