Linkages between family background, family formation and disadvantage in young adulthood

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6. Conclusion and Discussion

In this dissertation, I postulated two main research questions: 1) How has the relation between social background and family formation developed over time? 2) What are the consequences for the individual on choosing a particular family formation trajectory? Although this dissertation does not provide definitive answers to both these questions, results from the studies in this dissertation provide new knowledge and insights for future research in the areas of demography, family sociology and life-course research, but particularly for research on the intergenerational transmission of (dis)advantage.

In answering these questions, I adopted a life-course perspective. Elder and colleagues describe five key features of the life-course perspective, i.e. linked lives, human agency, life-span development, socio-historical and geographical location and timing of lives (Elder 1994; Elder, Johnson, and Crosnoe 2003). Linked lives refer to the fact that life courses are not shaped in isolation, but rather that lives are for an important part influenced by key social relationships, e.g. with parents, partner, family, and friends. This dissertation has focused on the impact of parents. The second pillar of the life-course perspective is human agency, which acknowledges that humans to some extent shape their own lives within socio-economic constraints, based on their own preferences. It assumes that humans have some autonomy in their decision making. This links to the discussion to what extent family formation is the result of individual preferences or economic constraints, which is captured by the tension between the two central theories in this dissertation, the Second Demographic Transition and the Pattern of Disadvantage. Life-span development refers to the life course being an ongoing process, in which previous events in the life course have an impact on events to come. This links with the Cumulative Disadvantage perspective, in that differences in family formation patterns may continue to have an impact on life outcomes and therefore create further disparities between people who have followed different types of family formation pathways. Fourth, the life-course perspective argues that socio-historical and geographical location of where people grow up has an impact on how people lead their lives. In this dissertation I have examined whether the link between social background and family formation has changed over time, by comparing different birth cohorts in their family formation patterns in relation to social background. Also, the influence of geographical context has been considered since the research covers multiple countries as the link between social background and family formation may be context dependent, but also the potential life outcomes of family formation choices. Finally, the timing of lives refers to when people experience certain transitions and how the timing of such events are related. This dissertation has paid particular attention to the timing of events and the interrelatedness of family and career events. Thus, the research of this thesis falls neatly within the life-course perspective. As I will discuss in this chapter, results from this study also show the value of the life-course perspective and the need for using such a framework in understanding the relationship between family background and family formation. First, the results of the four empirical studies included in this dissertation are summarized. Second, the implications of these results are discussed. Third, I point out some limitations of this research. Finally, I close with some suggestions for future research.

6.1 SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

The first two chapters focused on the first research question, i.e. how the relation between social background and family formation has developed over time. In Chapter 2 I examined to what extent the influence of parental education on union formation changes over time and across the life course. More specifically, the study examined the influence of parental education on the timing of the first union, the timing of first marriage and the choice for either unmarried or married cohabitation as the first union among Dutch born between 1930 and 1990, using data from 8 different nationally representative surveys.

In line with previous research, I found that higher parental education is associated with later entry into cohabitation and particularly into marriage (Brons, Liefbroer, and Ganzeboom 2017; South 2001; Wiik 2009). I distinguished between the educational attainment of the mother and the father, finding that the impact of educational attainment of the mother on union formation is stronger. Overall, results were similar for male and female young adults. The only significant differences were that for women, entry into a first union is postponed more, the higher the father's education is, while for men entry into marriage is postponed more, the higher the mother's education is.

The most surprising result from Chapter 2 was that the influence of parental education on union formation remains rather stable across different birth cohorts. The only exception is for men for whom the influence of parental education on opting for cohabitation over marriage as a first union decreases over time. Thus, the influence of parental education remains important even among more recent birth cohorts. This finding was at odds with the central hypothesis, i.e. that the influence of parental education would decrease over time and previous research findings (South 2001; Wiik 2009). This result challenges the idea that societies such as the Netherlands have individualized to the extent that family no longer influences young adults' decision-making. Furthermore, this study examined to what extent national-level economic conditions impact the relationship between parental education and union formation, but it appears from the results that economic circumstances also have little impact on the relationship between parental education and union formation.

Another important result of Chapter 2 is that the influence of parental education decreases as young adults age. There is a strong impact of parental education mainly at young ages, in which highly educated parents appear to prevent their children from entering a union quickly. Furthermore, the influence of parental education on timing of first marriage decreases after someone enters a cohabiting union. This suggests that a cohabiting couple is less influenced by parents than a couple not (yet) living together. This result shows the importance of the life-course perspective, as it suggests a shift in influence from parents to the partner during young adulthood. In sum, the impact of parents is not constant, but is stronger at younger ages and the influence of parental education decreases when the young adult enters a cohabiting relationship.

Much research on union and family formation considers educational attainment as the most important socio-economic indicator. In fact, most of this research assumes that the influence of parental background is completely mediated through educational attainment of the child. In order to account for this intergenerational transmission of educational advantage, a respondent's own education was included in the model in order to investigate whether the impact of parental education on union formation extends beyond the intergenerational transmission of education. Interestingly, there remains an effect of parental education, even after including a respondent's own education in the model. In fact, there appears to be very little mediation as the coefficients only decrease slightly when own educational attainment is included in the model. This implies that other mechanisms, such as socialization with family values or imitation of parental family behavior may partially explain the link between parental background and family formation.

Chapter 3 expanded on the research in Chapter 2 in multiple ways. First, it examined the start of the family formation process, including both union formation and parenthood. It focused on family formation pathways as an outcome rather than on single outcomes, such as cohabitation and marriage, thus viewing the family formation process from a holistic perspective. Second, it examined the influence of parental education on the family formation process in four distinct European countries, i.e. France, Sweden, Romania and Italy, using data from the first wave of the Generations and Gender Survey (GGS).

Competing Trajectories Analysis (CTA) (Studer et al. 2018) was used to assess when family formation trajectories start and who opts for which kind of family formation trajectory. The first step involved identifying what types of family formation pathways are present across the countries. I distinguished seven different types; *marriage and parenthood*, *slow marriage and parenthood* (which in many cases has unmarried cohabitation before marriage and parenthood), *cohabitation dissolution* (where one enters a cohabiting union, but this union dissolves), *marriage*, *single parent*, *cohabitation* and *cohabitation and parenthood*. The second step involved analyzing the cumulative predicted entry into each of these types with age for different birth cohort (1925-1944, 1945-1964, 1965-1994), parental education (low-middle-high) and country combinations.

For all countries in the oldest cohort marriage and parenthood was the dominant family formation pathway. In France and Sweden, this rapidly changed in the subsequent cohorts, in which people following the marriage and parenthood pathway became a minority. Instead, family pathways including cohabitation rather than marriage dominated the family formation picture in these countries in the youngest birth cohorts. The story in Italy and Romania was a bit different, as in these countries I observed less change in the type of family formation pathways that were followed, but much more in the timing of entry into these family formation pathways, with in particular children from highly educated parents delaying entry into family formation. In short, clear diffusion of new family formation pathways (all trajectories other than marriage quickly succeeded by children) was found in France and Sweden, but to a much lesser extent in Italy and Romania. Similar to Chapter 2, I expected that while family formation patterns would change over time, the impact of parental education would decrease across birth cohorts. Following the SDT theory, differences between individuals with different levels of parental education could at first increase as the children of highly educated could be the frontrunners of family formation change. Later on, these new family formation behaviors could diffuse to all social strata leading to fewer differences between those with high and low educated parents. However, the results from this study did not corroborate this narrative. Support for the notion that children of higher educated parents are the first to enter new types of family formation pathways is found in France, but to lesser extent in Sweden, Italy and Romania. However, the result that runs most counter to the narrative of the SDT is that in the 1945-1964, but also the 1965-1994 birth cohort, differences between the parental education groups in all countries persisted. Generally, among children of higher to middle educated parents the chance is higher that they opt for a more reversible family formation trajectory, i.e. trajectories which start with cohabitation and in which childbearing is postponed (in France and Sweden) or postpone family formation altogether (in Italy and Romania). On the other hand, with the exception of Italy, children of low educated parents were more likely to follow pathways in which childbearing occurs earlier in the family trajectory and more often outside marriage.

One could even argue that in the time period covered by my data, family pathways of young adults with different socio-economic background have diverged, given that compared with the 1925-1944 cohort, in the 1945-1964 and the 1965-1994 birth cohorts there are more and stronger significant differences by socio-economic background in the rate of entry into different family formation trajectories. Thus, in line with Chapter 2, I found that not only in the Netherlands, but also in four other European countries (Sweden, France, Italy, Romania) there remains a clear impact of parental education that continues to divide individuals in the tendency to follow certain types of family formation pathways.

Chapters 4 and 5 focused on the second research question, i.e. what are the consequences for the individual on choosing a particular family formation trajectory? Both chapters studied the influence of the transition to adulthood in the United States, using the same panel data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth of 1997 (NLSY97). Separate career and family sequences were created for each respondent in order to allow more detail in both the career and family domain. Career states were defined in terms of educational enrollment and number of working hours, whereas family states were defined on the basis of living arrangement, relationship status and parenthood status. Sequences of states were then clustered into different groups. Finally, the NLSY97 contains multiple measures of family background, of which parental education, parental income, childhood family structure and race were included in the analyses in both chapters.

Chapter 4 added a life-course perspective to research regarding social stratification and the intergenerational transmission of advantage. This study examined more in detail how career and family pathways influence income of young adults. Another important innovation of this study was that it examines income trajectories between age 25 and 32 rather than income at a single point in time. This is important because income is very unstable in young adult years and thus income at one time point may not be an accurate representation of someone's financial situation (Cheng 2015). Furthermore, with income trajectories I could examine to what extent there is cumulative advantage (Cheng 2014; DiPrete and Eirich 2006), or in other words to what extent incomes diverge between individuals with different family backgrounds following different pathways to adulthood.

All the different family background characteristics were associated with differences in income trajectories. The strongest effects were found for the socio-economic indicators, i.e. parental education and income, with those with highest parental education and income particularly having a stronger increase in income. However, childhood family structure and race also mattered. Individuals who were not raised in an intact family had lower incomes, particularly those raised by one biological and one step-parent. Regarding race, blacks had a significantly lower income development compared with whites. A striking finding was that family background continues to matter even when career and family pathways are included in the analysis. Family background did not only increase the likelihood of having a career and family pathway that was associated with a higher income trajectory, but family background had a (remaining) direct impact on the income trajectories of their children as well. This suggests that the impact of the parental home on income extends beyond the transmission of education and career.

The effects of the career and family pathways were stronger than those of family background. Regarding career pathways, women following a pathway that is typified by a long stay in a 4-year college education clearly diverged from the other groups, particularly from women who followed an intermittent employment type of career. Women whose career pathway contained attending 2-year college and/or working continuously more than 20 hours per week after high school formed an intermediate group in terms of income. The results for men were similar. In sum, those entering and staying in 4-year college education succeeded by full-time employment clearly had the highest income trajectory, those who had steady employment and/or attend 2-year college form a middle group, whereas those with no post-secondary education and little employment stability formed the bottom group. While most of these results were in line with previous research findings, this study demonstrated that already in late twenties to early thirties incomes are strongly diverging between those following different career pathways.

Family pathways, albeit to a lesser extent than career pathways, also had an impact on income trajectories. I observed divergence between men and women staying in the parental home or entering non-marital parenthood on the one hand and those following the other types of family pathways on the other. While career and family pathways were associated, results from linear growth curve models indicated that family pathways have an impact on income net of the influence of career pathways. This was the case for both men and women. However, a difference between men and women was that men appear to benefit more in terms of income from early marriage than women, who benefit more from postponing marriage and parenthood altogether. This suggests that there still exists a marriage premium particularly for men (Ahituv and Lerman 2007; Cheng 2016; de Linde Leonard and Stanley 2015).

In Chapter 5, the combined influence of career and family pathways on obesity risk in young adulthood was examined. Rather than examining the impact of career and family pathways separately, I used Multichannel Sequence Analysis (Gauthier et al. 2010; Pollock 2007), in order to examine the combined influence of family and career on obesity risk in young adulthood. An important note here is that obesity status at age 17 was included as a control variable. Thus, the study took into account differences prior to the transition to adulthood that may have led to an increased risk of obesity. The focus thus squarely was on becoming obese during young adulthood.

While in Chapter 4 results were relatively similar for men and women, in this study a different picture emerged. Women following 4-year college while spending most of the time living single had a much lower risk of developing obesity than women that attained less education and stay in the parental home or became single parents. For men, early marriage appeared to be a major risk factor for obesity. It is surprising, however, that those who enter marriage and parenthood early on did not have a higher risk of developing obesity compared with those who only marry. Thus, it is not care burden which increases the risk of obesity, but some other feature of this group of men that make them more likely to become obese. Moreover, many of the men in the early marriage cluster did attend 4-year college, suggesting that for men who marry early, college education does not serve as a protective factor. The results showed that influences of career and family on obesity cannot be singled out, but that role combinations matter. Finally, Chapter 5 also demonstrated that the same career and family pathways have different impacts for men and women and that the transition to adulthood has to be studied from a gender perspective when it comes to its influence on obesity.

Family background variables showed little remaining impact on the risk of obesity in young adulthood. This suggests that while family background factors may increase the likelihood of developing obesity during childhood, the risk of developing obesity for the first time in young adulthood has little relation to characteristics of the parental home. The only significant family background indicator was parental education, with those with higher parental education having a lower risk of developing obesity. This suggests that perhaps knowledge of health risks associated with obesity among people in one's network (which may be better known among educated people) decreases the risk of obesity.

6.2 DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

6.2.1 The lasting influence of parental socio-economic status on family formation

Results in Chapters 2 and 3 show that family formation behavior is still related to the educational level of the parents. Chapter 2 shows that union formation behavior continues to be stratified in terms of socio-economic background. Chapter 3 even suggests that the differences between social classes in terms of family pathways may have become stronger. While the results appear to suggest a divergence in family behavior between countries, the role of parental education appears to work in a similar way across countries. As found in Chapters 2 and 3, serious commitments such as marriage and childbearing are postponed by those from higher SES backgrounds compared with those from low SES backgrounds. In Western and Northern European countries children of highly educated parents usually start cohabiting with a partner, often appearing to test the relationship for some years before moving to marriage and parenthood. In Southern and Eastern European countries, children of highly educated parents strongly postpone family formation. Results of Chapter 2 also do not suggest a strong impact of macro-economic factors. However, the measurement used is only a crude indicator of economic conditions. Perhaps a more specific indicator such as youth unemployment would have revealed a moderating effect on the link between parental education and union formation. Unfortunately, this was not possible as good macro indicators do not reach back far enough in time. Furthermore, it appears that at least in the Dutch context, the influence of parental education does not only run through the educational attainment of the child. This is in line with recent comparative studies indicating that in some countries parental education continues to have an impact on family formation decisions whereas in other countries this is not the case (Anne Brons et al. 2017; Koops et al. 2017).

The narrative behind the SDT theory is that societies individualize as a result of increasing welfare and that, consequently, individuals would make decisions regarding family formation more independently. This leads to the expectation of a decreasing influence of social background on family formation, but results show the opposite, as the influence of social background persists and appears even to increase rather than to decrease. That is not to say that the SDT theory is of no merit. I observe rapid changes in family formation behavior and there is clear diffusion of family behavior in all countries and among all individuals of different social origin. I also find, particularly in France, that the children of high educated parents were at first more likely to diverge from the traditional marriage and parenthood pattern. However, SDT theory requires amendment when it comes to diffusion as it is clear that differences across social groups remain and appear to have even increased since the SDT. Chapter 3 reveals that social inequality in family formation pathways is relatively limited among people born before World War II. Those born after the war are more diverse in their pathways. Instead of viewing cultural change as an instigator of increased family formation diversity among all, it should be considered as an avenue towards new social inequality. The SDT shapes the opportunity for new inequalities described by the literature on Diverging Destinies and Pattern of Disadvantage. While the results in this dissertation suggest that the ties within the nuclear family may still be strong, it could be that individualization mainly weakened the links between extended family members and between members of social institutions such as the church. Therefore, young women facing an unintended pregnancy may have to rely more on their own in handling this situation. During the early 20th century, when the church had more influence on family behavior, it would be more likely that a (shotgun) marriage would be arranged. The stigma on childbearing outside of marriage in the past perhaps did make biological fathers more inclined to take on a parenting role and provide income for the family, whereas nowadays it may be easier to avoid parental responsibilities, leaving perhaps already disadvantaged mothers behind to deal with parenthood. Thus, while individualization has provided people more freedom to choose a family form that mostly fits with their own needs and desires, this may have been more beneficial for those with more resources. Lesthaeghe himself quotes Kathleen Kiernan by stating that “the SDT is not kind for all” (Lesthaeghe 2010), to which one may add “particularly for those from disadvantaged background”.

One explanation as to why children of high SES background start union formation, but particularly parenthood later, is that high SES parents want their children to focus on their career first. If so, early family formation will be viewed as a “distraction” from this goal, that should therefore be avoided. As found in Chapter 2, the influence of parental education is particularly strong in the early stages of young adulthood and fades as young adults age. Another explanation could be that children from high educated parents are more careful with tying the knot, as in their parents' generation it were the highly educated that were more prone to divorce. Studies on the intergenerational transmission of divorce show a strong link between divorce proneness of the parents and their children. Nowadays, as described in the Diverging Destinies literature, it is the low educated that are more prone to divorce. The question is whether the lower social classes will be successful in lowering divorce rates, having been more likely to have experienced the negative consequences of divorce and not wishing to pass this on to their children. However, for the lower classes it may be a different story compared with the higher classes in the past, as the lower social classes may be unable to prevent unstable family situations in terms of finances and relationships. In the United States research has demonstrated that marriage has become increasingly an institution for the privileged in the society (Wilcox, Wolfinger, and Stokes 2015). With the exception of Southern European countries, in which marriage is still an important pillar in family formation, this trend may be observed in Europe as well. In sum, results from this dissertation indicate that social background will remain and perhaps will even become a more important differentiating factor in family formation differences within Western societies. In the next section, I will discuss the role of family formation in the intergenerational transmission of (dis)advantage.

6.2.2 The role of family formation in the intergenerational transmission of (dis)advantage

This dissertation has not only examined how family background relates to family formation, but also how both family background and family formation impact indicators of financial security and health, i.e. personal income and obesity in young adulthood. This way I did not only investigate whether those from disadvantaged background are more likely to become disadvantaged themselves, but also what role family formation plays in this process. This dissertation therefore also informs the debate on the process of intergenerational transmission of (dis)advantage. Previous studies on the intergenerational transmission of advantage have focused on transmission through education (e.g. Blau and Duncan 1967; Breen and Jonsson 2005; Haveman, Robert and Wolfe 1995). This dissertation brings family into the equation both during childhood by examining the impact of childhood family structure, but also in the transition to adulthood by examining the impact of one's own family pathways on income and obesity.

The findings regarding the impact of parental social background on income trajectories are in line with the Diverging Destinies theory. McLanahan (2004) stated that as parental divorce would increasingly occur among those with lower education, the destinies of children from high and low socio-economic background would diverge. This is indeed clearly visible in the results of Chapter 4. Children from intact highly educated and wealthy homes clearly diverge from those from low educated, poor and broken families. While the impact of parental education and income appear to be a bit larger than that of childhood family structure and racial background, all these disadvantages stack up. That is, if for instance someone is raised by low educated parents who also divorced during his or her childhood, their projected income is lower than for someone who was raised by low educated parents who stayed together.

While these results show stark differences in income attainment in young adulthood on the basis of social background, these findings are not very surprising as they are in line with previous research demonstrating the large impact of family background on life chances (McLanahan and Jacobsen 2015; Putnam 2015). However, in Chapter 4, I also find that even when accounting for someone's career and family life-course pathways, social background continues to influence income attainment of the children, albeit much less compared with a model which does not incorporate individual life courses. This finding clearly demonstrates that the United States is far from the meritocratic ideal as portrayed by the American Dream (Putnam 2015). Not only do children of disadvantaged background have a lower likelihood of following career and family pathways that would lead them to attain higher income, even if they follow the career and family pathways that are associated with the highest income attainment, they still earn less compared with those from advantaged backgrounds. That is not to say that children brought up in disadvantaged circumstances can never become rich, but that – on average - as long as disadvantaged youths attend and complete university education and postpone family formation until late twenties they earn less income than their advantaged peers following the same pathways. The results therefore are in line with the Cumulative Disadvantage perspective, that is, those that start with an advantage accumulate more advantage as time goes by, whereas for those starting from a disadvantaged position it is difficult to catch up with someone from an advantaged position.

One can speculate on what this remaining impact of social background entails. It could be that children of advantaged backgrounds possess cultural capital as described by Bourdieu (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990) that helps them in making important career connections and being more successful in job interviews. Perhaps the social network of parents helps in acquiring jobs, or they are more able to help to finance a move to another city for a job. Another explanation could be that while these career and family sequences capture much information, perhaps certain information that is important is not captured by these sequences. For instance, perhaps children of advantaged background compared with those of disadvantaged background are more likely to pick college majors that are associated with higher income (Luijkx and van de Werfhorst 2010). While this research was unable to test specific reasons by which social background influences income attainment, this dissertation has shown that the influence of parents extends beyond setting their children on the right life path.

Chapter 4 does not only demonstrate that family structure in childhood matters for income attainment, but that the family decisions that young adults make themselves in the transition to adulthood matter as well. The fact that these family formation pathways have an effect on income next to career pathways, indicates that the intergenerational transmission of disadvantage does not only run through educational attainment. Generally, those who become parents outside of marriage have lower incomes in young adulthood. However, prolonging the stay in the parental home is also associated with lower income, which may partly be because these youths are unable to live independently, due to physical and/or mental problems. It appears that a family pathway in which someone leaves the parental home in his or her late teens or early twenties, but postpones serious relationships until after mid-twenties is associated with higher income, particularly for women. It therefore seems that experiencing single living before entering a cohabiting relationship or parenthood may be important for one's development. This finding relates well to the criticism on the Emerging Adulthood theory. Arnett (2000) describes that in the United States adolescence is no longer immediately followed by adulthood, but that there is an "in-between" life phase, which he describes as Emerging Adulthood in which adults explore their identities and refrain from strong life commitments. Critics of the theory, however, claim that this life phase is not universal among American youths, and that it is mainly privileged youths who experience this life phase (Berzin and De Marco 2010; Mitchell and Syed 2015). It may very well be that youths following the pathway described above experience this Emerging Adulthood phase, which contributes to the successful development of their work careers.

It is important, though, to place the results of Chapter 4 in context. The United States is described as a liberal welfare state, in which government expenditures on benefits for disadvantaged groups are relatively low compared with other Western countries, especially social-democratic regimes (Esping-Andersen 1990). This means that in the United States youths may have to rely more on the resources of their parents than in other Western countries, therefore increasing the influence of social background on life courses and outcomes. One may argue that in social-democratic regimes both the link between social background and family formation and the link between family formation and life outcomes are weaker. On the other hand, there are indications from other findings in this dissertation that the influence of social background may also be strong in more social-democratic countries. Chapter 3 demonstrates that in Sweden and France in the youngest birth cohort children with low educated parents were more likely to have a family pathway including parenthood outside of marriage, while those with high educated parents would enter family formation choosing to cohabit first for a couple of years. In Chapter 2, I find that parental education influences relationship behavior beyond the intergenerational transmission of education. Thus, it is likely that in countries with more welfare expenditures, intergenerational transmission through family formation still is important.

Disadvantage is not only expressed in socio-economic indicators such as income, but also in health. In Chapter 5, I therefore examine whether career and family pathways also have an influence on obesity, a health condition linked with many health risks (Kopelman 2007). The United States is a particular context when it comes to obesity, as about a third of the population suffers from obesity (Ogden et al. 2014). However, it is unclear whether this high prevalence of obesity affects the link between social disadvantage and obesity risk. Previous research has indicated that there is a strong link between growing up in disadvantaged circumstances and childhood obesity (Schmeer 2012; Wells et al. 2010; Whitaker et al. 1997). In examining the influence of career and family pathways on obesity risk, I therefore account for selection, by taking into account whether someone was already obese before the transition to adulthood. Results from this study show that the combination of career and family pathways matters when it comes to obesity risk. In line with Chapter 4, attending 4-year college and living independently during one's twenties are related to a lower obesity risk. However, not all the results are in line with Chapter 4 in terms of which pathways are related to better outcomes. For men, there is a clear premium on income for marrying relatively early and having children later, but this same pathway is associated with a higher risk of developing obesity. Thus, certain life-course pathways are associated with advantage in one respect, but may be associated with disadvantage in another, demonstrating that one has to be careful in categorizing pathways in terms of advantage and disadvantage. Furthermore, family background operates somewhat differently when it comes to obesity risk. In Chapter 5 I find that parental education has an impact on developing obesity during young adulthood next to career and family pathways. When it comes to obesity, having highly educated parents may raise someone's awareness of the importance of a healthy diet and physical exercise. In terms of racial background, I find that blacks have a higher risk of obesity than whites. Whether this is due to life-style differences or genetic differences remains unclear. This does not imply that other social background indicators, such as parental income and childhood family structure, have no relation with obesity, but it appears that the impact of these indicators fades after youths enter the transition to adulthood, whereas parental education and race appear to have a more lasting influence.

While the results of family background and career and family pathways on obesity may be a bit different compared with income as an outcome, the results of both studies show that in the process of intergenerational transmission of (dis)advantage family pathways play an important role.

6.2.3 The importance of life courses and how to capture them

This dissertation demonstrates that it is important to capture family formation as a process. In Chapter 2, I only focus on part of the family formation process, i.e. union formation. In this chapter I use event-history analysis, a method widely used in demography and family sociology, distinguishing between marriage and unmarried cohabitation. However, one could argue that there is more variation within both these destinations. For instance, a cohabiting relationship which is quickly succeeded by parenthood is a different type of cohabitation than for instance a cohabitating relationship in which a marriage follows a couple of years later. This is also stressed by literature on the meaning of cohabitation (Hiekel et al. 2014). In general, it has been argued that the transition to adulthood and family formation have to be analyzed more holistically as the sequence of events provides meaning to the process of a whole, that cannot be captured if one studies all the events separately (Billari 2001). This approach is followed in Chapter 3, yet it still uses event-history analysis as well. The Competing Trajectories (CTA) procedure allowed me to analyze the start of family formation and the pathways following the first family formation event. Instead of having competing destinations such as marriage, cohabitation and single parenthood, CTA provided clusters of more detailed family formation pathways. With respect to sequence analysis, CTA provides more clear clustering, because family formation clusters are often different on the basis of the timing of the first event (Studer et al 2018). Thus, by having sequences start at the timing of the first family event, the cluster solution of Chapter 3 provides clear homogeneous clusters with internal consistency (Studer and Ritschard 2016). Chapter 3 also demonstrates that across multiple countries a clear set of different types of family formation pathways could be identified, which supports the notion that this cluster solution could be the basis for a new typology on family formation pathways.

Sequence analysis (SA) is most often used to analyze family formation trajectories as an outcome. However, in this dissertation SA is also used to create independent variables capturing the impact of career and family pathways on income trajectories and obesity risk. In Chapter 4, instead of using dichotomous variables indicating the membership of a particular cluster, I adopted a strategy in which I created variables indicating the relative distance to the most typical sequence of each cluster, the medoid. These Grade of Membership (GoM) variables, more optimally use the information provided by the distance matrix (on which the clustering is based). Instead of treating someone's sequence as belonging to one cluster, this allowed a more nuanced approach in which someone's sequence is compared with the most typical sequences of all clusters. Additional analyses revealed that models using the GoM variables performed better in terms of model fit compared with models in which cluster grouping variables are used. Furthermore, compared with a model with more simple indicators, such as educational level and duration of unemployment as career indicators and teenage parenthood and whether someone has left the parental home as family formation indicators (all indicators on situation before age 25, see Appendix D in Chapter 4), the GoM approach also proved to provide a better model fit. Therefore, the GoM method shows that life-course trajectories contain information that is valuable in determining differences in income that cannot be captured by simple indicators. A potential drawback of the GoM approach is that interpretation of results of GoM variables is a bit less straightforward, since one has to interpret the results in relative terms (the extent to which one pathway is similar to a specific cluster), whereas with the usual cluster variable approach it is simply being part of a cluster or not that matters. More simple indicators or cluster variables therefore are easier to interpret, but at the cost of not capturing the impact of more subtle differences in life courses.

The decision on the number of GoM variables to include in the model in Chapter 4 is based on the number of GoM variables that provide the highest model fit, meaning that the cluster solution to draw the GoM variables from is based on what explains most variance in terms of income trajectories. That is, multiple analyses are run, which only differ in the number of GoM variables included. From these different analyses, the one with the highest model fit (in terms of AIC) is picked and the coefficients from this model were interpreted. This approach differs from the usual one in sequence analysis, in which the number of clusters are chosen on the basis of creating optimal internal consistency within clusters. However, internal consistency of clusters may not be meaningful when examining the relationship between life courses and life-course outcomes. For instance, an additional cluster may be meaningful from an internal consistency perspective, but if this extra cluster does not explain more variation in the outcome variable, it is not useful. My approach of using the optimal number of GoM variables is better suited to discover which distinctions matter. On the other hand, this approach is more data driven and less theoretically informed. In this study I choose to create GoM variables that were linked to observed sequences in the data, but one could also relate sequences to theoretically informed pathways.

In Chapter 5, rather than the GoM method, I used the cluster variable approach. However, rather than examining the impact of career and family pathways separately, I examined the influence of combined career and family pathways. Family and career are intertwined and mutually influence one another, which is my main reason to combine career and family pathways into one variable. In Chapter 5 I used a particular form of sequence analysis, called Multichannel Sequence Analysis, in which rather than having clusters based on one sequence, clusters are based on two or more types of sequences. The results from Chapter 5 show the value of this approach as it reveals that certain combinations of career and family pathways matter. On the other hand, the clustering solutions of the Multichannel Sequence Analysis show less internal consistency, which means that there also may be quite some variation within the clusters in terms of obesity risk.

Regarding the meaning of life courses, particularly Chapter 5 revealed that life courses can have a different impact for different groups of people. Chapter 5 showed that for men certain career-family pathways were linked with a higher obesity risk while not for women and vice versa. This probably has to do with the roles that men and women adopt during family formation. A clear example is single motherhood. The daily schedule of the biological father has fewer changes than that of the mother, as the mother usually ends up taking care of the child, while the biological father can potentially retract from any responsibilities for the child and live a relatively unaltered life-style. Other subgroup distinctions in the meaning of life courses may also be present. Ethnic or religious background may provide specific meaning to a life course. For instance, unmarried cohabitation may be more stressful for someone of a religious background compared to someone from a non-religious background as a result of stigma by their religious community. It may therefore be worthwhile examining the impact of the same career and family sequences across groups if one believes these same pathways can lead to different outcomes for different groups as they may contain different meanings.

All in all, this dissertation has demonstrated that sequence analysis is not only a tool for description, but can also be used in more explanatory analyses. The transition to adulthood is a complex life phase in which one transition influences the timing and likelihood of other transitions across domains such as career and family. Therefore, proving causal relationships will always prove to be difficult given the endogenous nature of the variables that capture family formation or the transition to adulthood. Thus, pathways should be considered as variables that link social background with life-course outcomes and can perhaps as such be incorporated in models within a more causal framework.

Improving methods on capturing the life course better is an important aim for future research to counter the current limitations of life-course methods. In the next section, I will discuss some limitations of this dissertation.

6.3 LIMITATIONS

Although this dissertation has provided pertinent answers to my central research questions, it is not without limitations. Some of the limitations result from the topic being so broad that one cannot simply cover every aspect, whereas other limitations result from limitations in the data used in this study. When reexamining the theoretical model presented in Chapter 1, some parts of the theoretical model have not been fully covered by this dissertation. This is particularly true for the question how the historical and country context impact the relationship between family formation pathways and wellbeing. In this dissertation I only examined two wellbeing-related outcomes, income and obesity, in the contemporary United States. However, as mentioned above, the question is to what extent these results can be generalized to other social and historical contexts. In terms of the link between family background and family formation, Chapter 2 and 3 together examined changes in the link between parental education and family formation over time in five different European countries. However, this research could also be extended to more countries. Another aspect of the theoretical model that could have been examined in more detail, was the mediating role of family formation in the influence of family background on wellbeing. In Chapter 4, I find that even when career and family pathways are included in a model predicting income trajectories, family background factors still have a remaining effect on these income trajectories. However, in the analysis I do not provide an answer as to how much of the influence of family background on personal income is mediated through family and career life-course pathways. The same applies to Chapter 5 where I examine obesity risk, but do not examine the potential mediating role of career-family pathways. In order to provide answers to these questions, one would require mediation analysis (MacKinnon and Valente 2014).

This dissertation revealed how family background and family formation are associated with wellbeing. However, this thesis has not unraveled the exact mechanisms by which family background influences family formation and subsequent wellbeing. An important finding of Chapter 2 is that the intergenerational transmission of education only partly explains differences in family formation pathways. Yet, it is unclear exactly what other mechanisms, like differences in preferences or differences in actual or perceived constraints, are at play. Thus, the question around agency has remained partially unanswered. Moreover, this research has not been able to provide statistical tests on reasons why certain family formation pathways would be linked with (dis)advantage. However, what this dissertation has demonstrated is the multifaceted nature in which both family background and family formation are linked with one another and with subsequent wellbeing.

Possibly the link between family formation and wellbeing in Chapters 4 and 5 could have been more clear if respondents would have been followed until later in adulthood. Many of the respondents will still experience many transitions and being able to compare outcomes at for instance age 40 would have provided a more complete picture of where individuals end up on the social ladder or in terms of health status. On the other hand, results are easily outdated when one follows individuals for a longer part of their life course as the results of these studies may have little bearing on contemporary youths who may face different challenges compared with previous generations. Furthermore, the results from this study demonstrate that groups of young adults are already diverging in young adulthood, which is an interesting result in itself. In Chapters 2 and 3 I was able to capture and compare family formation pathways, but was unable to link them with wellbeing provided the cross-sectional structure of the data. Furthermore, the data of these chapters consisted of retrospective life histories which are considered less reliable than panel data due to recall bias. Problems include inaccurate dates of cohabitation histories and particularly fathers not reporting offspring, which could bias results (Hayford and Morgan 2008; Kreyenfeld and Bastin 2016).

Finally, in this thesis parents have been considered the main influencers in young adults' lives, but naturally there are other actors who influence young adults, such as members of their social networks or neighborhood and later on the partner. For instance, Christakis and Fowler (2013) show the importance of the social network when it comes to obesity risk. Future research could investigate other actors that influence respondents in their family formation decisions next to parents. In the next section, I reflect more broadly on what future researchers in this area should consider.

6.4 FUTURE RESEARCH

To understand more clearly the impact that family background and family formation have on later life (dis)advantage, the most obvious path for future research is to investigate the relationships of family background and family formation with a more diverse set of outcomes. In Chapter 4, I investigated how family and career pathways during the transition to adulthood were related to personal income. However, there are other indicators of socio-economic status, such as household income, wealth and job status that could indicate different types of socio-economic (dis)advantage. In Chapter 5 I examined obesity as a health-related outcome, but naturally there are many other health outcomes that could be related with career-family pathways in young adulthood. One could think of the risk of obtaining certain diseases or physical disabilities. Furthermore, mental health conditions such as depression and anxiety may be more strongly related to some family formation pathways than to others. Also, health behaviors, such as smoking, drinking and drugs use, could be linked with family formation.

Finally, one could relate family background and family formation to other types of outcomes, such as life satisfaction, civic participation or criminal activity.

In this dissertation I analyzed different indicators of family background covering different aspects. However, these measures did not capture the dynamic nature of family background. This dissertation applied the life-course perspective to the transition to adulthood, but the life-course perspective could also be more fully applied on family background. There are potentially important transitions during childhood, such as moving households, or experiencing a divorce or parental unemployment that can have implications for the remainder of someone's life course (Aquilino 1996; Feldhaus, Boehnke, and Krohn 2015). Furthermore, in this dissertation family background was mainly related to household conditions when respondents were teenagers, but future research could investigate the impact of fluctuations of family background indicators during childhood and adolescence on family formation behavior. Finally, one could have different indicators relating to early childhood, such as time spent with children (Kalil, Ryan, and Corey 2012) that could be incorporated in future research.

Ideally, future research on family formation and the intergenerational transmission of (dis)advantage would incorporate all links of the theoretical model presented in Chapter 1 in one research design. Thus, one would conduct research such as in Chapter 4 and 5, but also investigate the linkage between social background and family formation, such as in Chapter 2 and 3. Another important aspect of the model is that the strength of the linkages between family background, family formation and wellbeing may depend on the context. Therefore, future research should examine how these relationships differ between countries (or even regions within countries) and over time. In examining cross-national differences one can focus on the influence of different types of institutional or cultural differences, while in investigating temporal changes one can assess the impact of key historical events, such as the credit crisis. Finally, family formation pathways should be considered next to career pathways as an important mediator of the influence of family background on (dis)advantage. Thus, a comprehensive study would fully embrace the life-course perspective as described above. It would bring together life-course research with research on the intergenerational transmission of advantage, providing more detailed answers to how life courses develop and how they are related to (dis)advantage. For instance, methods such as Structural Equation Modeling (Muthén and Muthén 2015) could be used to reveal both direct and mediating relationships. Sequence analysis could be used to create more detailed variables regarding career and family sequences, such as in Chapter 4.

Another important challenge for future research is collecting the 'right' data. The life-course approach has not only important implications for the way we conduct analysis, but also for the way we collect data. As mentioned above, it would be best to track individuals from early childhood until adulthood in order to capture all key events in people's life courses that may or may not facilitate the intergenerational transmission of (dis)advantage. An example of this type of design is the Millennium Cohort Study in the UK. It would be ideal if all countries would collect data such as this, but for now, comparative datasets such as the Generations and Gender Survey (GGS), the European Social Survey (ESS) and the Survey of Health, Ageing and Retirement in Europe (SHARE) may be relatively decent alternatives, especially since they are moving towards panel data collection. Furthermore, efforts could be made to harmonize existing cohort studies in European and North American countries. The requirement in terms of the number of countries to be included would not necessarily have to be high, as long as distinct Western countries, for instance in terms of their welfare regime (Esping-Andersen 1990), would be included. In many North American and European countries, family panel study infrastructures are maturing, increasing the opportunity that in the near future a comparative harmonized life-course dataset could be constructed. Harmonizing data is an important first step, but creating a central hub to coordinate the collection of cohort study data would be even better.

Another type of data that is out there are big data gathered by governments, but also by social media, such as Google, Facebook and LinkedIn. While governments have important information on individuals relevant for studying family formation, it may be difficult to use register data from multiple countries given their restricted access. Social media may also be hesitant to share detailed information, but if one would be granted access to more detailed anonymized information one could have respondents from multiple countries. While these data may have their own unique problems, they could still be a welcome addition in the study of family formation and family change (Cesare et al. 2018).

If these types of high-quality detailed data would become available, one could unravel the now still hidden mechanisms by which family background and family formation contribute to the intergenerational transmission of disadvantage and the accumulation of life-course (dis)advantages. Global economic, social, technological and environmental developments may create new opportunities, but also pose new challenges to the current generation and the ones to come. A combination of improving data infrastructures, analytical life-course methods and the computational capacity of these methods to handle increasingly large and complex datasets can form a good basis to monitor the relationship between family background, family formation and subsequent wellbeing. This would create fascinating new opportunities to fully unravel the role that family plays in determining people's wellbeing in life.

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