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Past experiences and older adults' attitudes: a lifecourse perspective

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ABSTRACT
In this study we apply a lifecourse perspective to an examination of older adults' attitudes about gender roles and moral issues. The study goes beyond previous research in that it examines the relationships between older adults' attitudes and: (a) experiences in the parental home, (b) people's own marital and work experiences through the entire lifecourse, and (c) the marital and work experiences of their children. The sample consists of respondents aged 55 or more years from the 'Living Arrangements and Social Networks of Older Adults in The Netherlands' survey of 1992 and the 'Longitudinal Ageing Study Amsterdam'. It is shown that a large majority of older adults subscribe to the view that people have the freedom to make their own choices about the issues of voluntary childlessness, abortion and euthanasia. Similarly, most older adults favour equality between men and women. Multivariate analyses show that people's attitudes are generally consistent with their lifecourse experiences. It is found that unconventional lifecourse experiences, particularly with respect to childbearing, associate with more progressive attitudes in late life. The behaviour and lifecourse experiences of their children are also related to older adults' attitudes. Particularly, if their children co-habited, older adults tend to be more progressive. These findings suggest that an important mechanism by which societal change may have affected older adults is through their children's experiences.

KEY WORDS – attitudes, older adults, lifecourse.

Introduction

Western societies have witnessed major socio-demographic changes during the second half of the 20th century, such as a rise in female labour-force participation, divorce and co-habitation. At the same time, there has been increasing acceptance of these changes, as indicated by greater support for gender equality and increased tolerance of the various choices that people make in their lives (*e.g.* Smith 1990; Social and Cultural Planning

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Office of the Netherlands 1998; Thornton and Young-DeMarco 2001). These changes can be interpreted as a shift towards greater progressiveness, in the sense that both people's behaviour and attitudes have become increasingly oriented towards the principles of equality, freedom and autonomy (Thornton and Young-DeMarco 2001: 1010–2). Given their simultaneity and similarity, the trends are often thought to be mutually reinforcing: attitudinal change may have changed socio-demographic behaviour, and behavioural changes may have led to changes in attitudes (*e.g.* Lesthaeghe 1983; Rindfuss, Brewster and Kavee 1996).

It is therefore no surprise that there has been a growing interest in attitudinal change and its connections to the lifecourse. Of particular interest are how social change comes about and how it manifests itself in individuals' lifecourses (see Alwin 1994, 1997). For long, the dominant view was that societal developments mainly affect the young and that social change was mainly achieved by the replacement of one generation by the next – which emphasises the importance of cohort effects (Ryder 1965). This reasoning is consistent with a model of individual change which assumes that people's attitudes are only receptive to change during their formative years, and that beyond young adulthood they remain stable (Alwin 1997: 166–7). The idea that social change mainly affects the young is also consistent with a model that does assume attitudinal change in later life, but only as a by-product of ageing which brings less progressive attitudes in old age. Such age-related attitudinal changes are not a reaction to societal change, but represent ageing effects.

Although these views have been widespread, they have also been much criticised (*e.g.* Glenn 1974; Niemi and Sobieszek 1977; Sears 1981). Critics argue that societal change may also affect older adults, because people are open to change throughout their entire life – although scholars acknowledge that such receptiveness may vary by age, thereby introducing another reference to ageing effects. Empirical studies of the stability of attitudes have indeed shown that people are open to attitudinal change later in life, especially after mid-life (Alwin 1994: 170–4). Older adults may be indirectly affected by massive societal change (period effects) and by their personal experiences. With respect to the latter, older adults' attitudes may change due to experiences later in the lifecourse (Alwin 1997: 166) or in reaction to their children's lifecourse experiences (Bengtson and Troll 1978; Jennings and Niemi 1981; Hagestad 1984; Alwin, Cohen and Newcomb 1991).

Although older adults have been included in analyses of age, cohort and period effects, most research on the link between the lifecourse and attitudes has focused on young adults. In this study, we shift the focus to older adults. Many of the radical cultural and socio-demographic changes have

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taken place when today's older people had already reached a late stage in life, and many have been most profound among younger people. These developments are therefore likely to have affected older people through both their own late-life experiences and their children's experiences. We have therefore taken a broader lifecourse perspective than previous studies, in that we examine how people's experiences through (almost) the entire life span relate to their attitudes late in life, and we assess the 'interdependency' between older adults' attitudes and the lifecourse experiences of their parents and children (Elder 1994). We focus on people's work and family experiences because changes in these areas have been particularly profound and exemplify the trends towards greater equality, freedom and autonomy. For similar reasons, we examine attitudes towards gender roles and moral issues. The analyses are for The Netherlands, and it should be remembered that although the country has experienced similar cultural and demographic changes to other industrialised societies, Dutch attitudes are currently among the most progressive in Europe, particularly with respect to gender equality and individuals' freedom to make their own choices (Social and Cultural Planning Office of the Netherlands 2000: 181–2).

We first describe older men's and women's attitudes towards gender roles and moral issues, *i.e.* voluntary childlessness, abortion and euthanasia. We then address the question of the extent to which older adults' attitudes are related to: (a) their experiences in the parental home, (b) their own lifecourse experiences, and (c) their children's experiences. The data do not allow for a comparison of older and younger adults' attitudes, but the main interest of our analysis lies in the relation between older adults' attitudes and the lifecourse, not in the decomposition of ageing, cohort or period effects.[1] In the following analyses of the relationship between attitudes and lifecourse experiences, we do however control for age.

A longitudinal design, in which attitudes at an earlier stage in life are controlled for, would be ideal, but the limited duration of the average panel study means that it is normally impossible to examine the relation between attitudes and experiences over the entire life span. We therefore rely on a cross-sectional design, in which the relationships between older adults' current attitudes and parental background, own experiences and their children's are examined. Such a design does not allow us to infer causality for the direction of some relationships, particularly that between older adults' attitudes and their own lifecourse. A relationship between attitudes and older adults' own lifecourse does not necessarily imply that prior experiences have shaped people's attitudes, but may also result from a reinforcing process between attitudes and lifecourse choices earlier in life

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(Thornton, Alwin and Camburn 1983; Jansen and Kalmijn 2000). While the direction of causality for parental background effects is clear, it may also be problematic for the relationships between older adults' attitudes and their children's lifecourse experiences. An association may reflect the influence of children's behaviour on their parents' attitudes, but the converse may also be true. Because we take into account older adults' parental background and their own lifecourse experiences when assessing the relationship with their children's behaviour, this problem of reversed causality is to some extent overcome.

Despite these problems of causal inference, this study offers new insights because most previous research has considered only young adults, and a study of older people will show both whether the influence of parental background persists into late life and whether experiences through (almost) the entire lifecourse relate to people's attitudes. In addition, evidence on the influence of children on their parents is limited and prior work has focused on the influence of only a few characteristics of children on their parents' attitudes (see Glass, Bengtson and Dunham 1986; Axinn and Thornton 1993; Vollebergh, Iedema and Raaijmakers 2001). By studying older respondents, a broader array of children's lifecourse experiences can be considered because they have reached adulthood.

Parental background and attitudes

Parents are likely to play an important role in shaping a person's attitudes: they may actively transmit their ideas or children may observe what their parents do and learn indirectly (Gecas and Seff 1990; Moen, Erickson and Dempster-McClain 1997: 282). In the context of indirect learning, unconventional behaviour that deviates from traditional (or formerly prescribed) ways of living, such as a parental divorce or mother's employment, may be particularly important. Such behaviour indicates that parents make their own choices regardless of prevailing norms and put into practice the principles of freedom, autonomy and equality: this may invoke similar progressive views in their children. In addition, some parents, such as the more educated, may encourage children to formulate their own views independent of the social environment (Myers and Booth 2002: 21). While we cannot assess the influence of parental attitudes, we focus on parental characteristics that are not only indicative of their attitudes, but also reflect a family climate that promotes independent thinking or manifests unconventional behaviour in the work and family domains. Specifically, we expect that older adults who have had a working mother,

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experienced a parental divorce, had higher-educated parents and a father with a high-level job, will have more progressive attitudes towards gender roles and moral issues. Previous studies – mostly on young adults and on gender-role attitudes – have suggested that these characteristics are associated with more progressive attitudes, even after controlling for parental attitudes (Thornton *et al.* 1983; Tallichet and Willets 1986; Moen *et al.* 1997; Cunningham 2001; Vollebergh *et al.* 2001; Myers and Booth 2002).

People's own lifecourse and attitudes

People with an unconventional lifecourse probably have more progressive attitudes than those with a conventional lifecourse. First, unconventional experiences might indicate progressive attitudes, in that people with an orientation towards equality or autonomy are less likely to conform to traditional ways of living. Second, people's attitudes may adapt to their lifecourse experiences. In other words, experiences might reinforce existing attitudes or, when behaviour clashes with prior attitudes, a person's attitudes may change to establish greater congruence between attitudes and behaviour. Conventional behaviour might therefore lead to more traditional views, and unconventional behaviour to progressive views (for an extended discussion see Cooper and Croyle 1984). A reinforcing process between attitudes and behaviour leads us to hypothesise that people who had never entered a union, had no children, had fewer children, ever co-habited or ever divorced have more progressive attitudes on gender roles and moral issues. Because unconventional working behaviour is sex-specific, it is further hypothesised that women who have worked (or who worked more) are more progressive, whereas men with more work experience are less progressive. Previous studies indeed provide ample evidence for such a reinforcing process between behaviour and attitudes, especially on gender-role attitudes (Thornton *et al.* 1983; Waite, Goldscheider and Witsberger 1986; Morgan and Waite 1987; Clarkberg, Stolzenberg and Waite 1995; Moors 1996; Jansen and Kalmijn 2000).

Children's lifecourse and attitudes

Although most attention has been given to the influence of parents on their children, children might also affect their parents' attitudes (Bengtson and Troll 1978; Jennings and Niemi 1981; Hagestad 1984; Alwin, Cohen and Newcomb 1991). Through direct communication or the parents'

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observations of their children's behaviour, the parents may be influenced by their children. Children's unconventional experiences are particularly likely to encourage progressive attitudes in their parents: they are markers of the children's progressive attitudes, which might be actively communicated to their parents. Moreover, parents have incentives to adjust their attitudes when observing their children's behaviour; for example, to maintain close contact or if they see that the unconventional behaviour has positive effects for their children (Axinn and Thornton 1993: 235). This study has no information on children's attitudes, and so focuses on children's work and marital behaviour. Particularly, we hypothesise that co-habitation, divorce, female employment and male unemployment among the children is associated with more progressive attitudes about gender roles and moral issues in the parents. A few previous studies have indeed shown that children's attitudes and behaviour affect the parents' attitudes (Glass *et al.* 1986; Axinn and Thornton 1993).

Data

The data for the independent variables are from the *Living Arrangements and Social Networks of Older Adults in The Netherlands* (LSN) survey of 1992 (Broese van Groenou *et al.* 1995). Respondents were drawn from the population registers of 11 municipalities with varying levels of urbanisation. The response rate was 62 per cent, not unusually low for Dutch surveys. The sample was stratified by gender and year of birth to produce similar numbers of men and women for several age groups or birth cohorts. In total, 4,494 men and women born between 1903 and 1937 participated (aged 55–89 years at the time of the survey). Data on parental background, older adults' marital and work history, and their children's work and family history were gathered during face-to-face interviews. Complete data are not available for all 4,494 respondents, because some were administered a short version of the questionnaire, and because there were terminated interviews and missing answers. The information on attitudes was obtained from the first wave of the *Longitudinal Ageing Study Amsterdam* (LASA) (Deeg, Knipscheer and Van Tilburg 1993). LASA was a follow-up survey among 3,805 LSN respondents born between 1908 and 1937: 3,107 respondents were interviewed and attitudinal data are available for 2,303 respondents.[2] After linking the information from these 2,303 respondents with the LSN items, 1,774 respondents had valid data on the independent variables. After some specific exclusions and through missing values, the final sample was 1,689 for the analyses on moral attitudes and 1,680 for the analyses on gender-role attitudes.[3]

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Measures of and descriptive findings on gender-role attitudes

Gender-role attitudes are measured by means of four items (based on Middendorp 1978) on people's opinions about men's and women's roles, particularly whether their roles were perceived as equal. Respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed with four statements about gender roles. The exact wording of these statements and the distribution of respondents' answers are shown in Table 1. Almost 90 per cent of both men and women (strongly) disagreed with the statement that 'getting an education is less important for a girl than a boy', and only nine per cent (strongly) agreed. Respondents were slightly less progressive about differences in raising girls and boys. About 70 per cent of both men and women (strongly) disagreed with the statement that boys can be raised with more freedom than girls, but about 18 per cent of the men and 13 per cent of the women (strongly) agreed. Similar percentages agreed that 'it is not natural for women to supervise men in a company'. This level of support for equality between the sexes is high by any standard – although support was even higher among a Dutch sample that also included younger people (Weesie *et al.* 1995, own calculations).[4] When it comes to whether women are more capable of raising infant children than men, a different pattern emerged and only a minority of men and women (strongly) disagreed. In particular, men seemed to believe that 'women are more fitted to raise children', for 70 per cent (strongly) agreed with this statement as against 50 per cent of women. These percentages are substantially higher than the 36 per cent reported from a random sample of the all-age Dutch population in 1991 (Social and Cultural Planning Office of the Netherlands 1998: 142). With the exception of the first item, the level of agreement differed significantly between men and women. Women were more progressive than men, especially when asked about women's greater fitness to raise young children.

To compute individual-scale scores for gender-role attitudes, the few respondents with missing values on individual items were assigned the mean of their scores on the non-missing items, and by summing the items a Likert-scale was constructed with a range from '4' to '20' (the high scores indicating progressive gender-role attitudes). No scale score was assigned if a respondent did not answer all questions. Applying Mokken's (1971) hierarchical scaling model, the items constituted a homogeneous scale among men (Loevinger's $H = 0.34$) and women ($H = 0.41$), and its reliability was $\rho = 0.62$ and $\rho = 0.67$ respectively. These reliability coefficients are specific to multi-categorical items (Molenaar and Sijtsma 1988), but can be interpreted in the same way as Cronbach's α for interval-level items. The mean scores were 14.8 for men and 15.5 for women.

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TABLE 1. *Gender-role attitudes among men and women*

Expression and level of agreement	Men (%)	Women (%)	Chi-squared
All things considered, it is not so important for a girl to get a good school education as a boy			
Strongly disagree	73	77	
Disagree	13	10	
No agreement/disagreement	4	3	
Agree	6	5	
Strongly agree	3	4	
No answer	1	1	4.4
Generally speaking, boys can be raised with more freedom than girls			
Strongly disagree	49	58	
Disagree	19	13	
No agreement/disagreement	13	13	
Agree	15	11	
Strongly agree	3	2	
No answer	1	2	26.7**
It is not natural for women to supervise men in a company			
Strongly disagree	49	53	
Disagree	20	15	
No agreement/disagreement	17	16	
Agree	9	7	
Strongly agree	5	6	
No answer	0	2	19.9**
A woman is more fitted to raise infant children than a man			
Strongly disagree	8	18	
Disagree	11	17	
No agreement/disagreement	11	13	
Agree	43	30	
Strongly agree	27	20	
No answer	0	1	82.8**
Sample size	802	878	

Significance levels: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$. All test statistics have five degrees of freedom.

A Student's *t* test indicated that the means differed significantly, which once again shows that women were more progressive about gender roles than men. The distribution of the scale scores was skewed to the left, with most respondents having progressive gender-role attitudes.

Measures of and descriptive findings on attitudes towards moral issues

Attitudes towards moral issues were measured by three items (based on Middendorp 1978) that comprised questions about people's opinions on voluntary childlessness, abortion and euthanasia. These items reflect the respondents' permissiveness towards an individual's freedom of choice on

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TABLE 2. *Attitudes towards moral issues among men and women*

Expression and level of agreement	Men (%)	Women (%)	Chi-squared
A couple consciously chooses to have no children (and there is no medical reason). Do you approve of their choice or do you think it unacceptable?			
Acceptable	67	65	
Not acceptable	7	7	
Opposed	5	3	
No opinion	19	22	
No answer	2	3	11.2*
Do you think there are circumstances which allow an abortion?			
Yes, there are	74	68	
No, there are not	8	9	
No opinion	17	20	
No answer	2	3	7·3
Suppose a doctor is able to end a person's suffering on his or her own request by giving an injection. What do you think he should do?			
Yes, he should	41	38	
It depends	36	37	
No, he should not	13	12	
No opinion	9	10	
No answer	0	2	11.4*
Sample size	808	881	

Significance levels: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$. Degrees of freedom for the chi-squared test are one less than the number of categories.

these morally contentious issues. The exact wording of the questions and the descriptive results are presented in Table 2. A large majority of both older men and women thought it acceptable for couples to choose not to have children, and only about 10 per cent found the choice unacceptable or something they were against. Remarkably, about 20 per cent had no opinion. A similar pattern was found for attitudes to abortion: three-quarters of the male respondents and about 70 per cent of the female respondents thought that there were circumstances under which an abortion was permissible. Nearly 10 per cent thought that there were no such circumstances, and about 20 per cent had no opinion.

With respect to opinions on euthanasia, the percentage of respondents with no opinion (10 %) was one-half that for the previous items. Given the age of the respondents, euthanasia might be more salient than childlessness or abortion. Furthermore, about 40 per cent of the men and women thought that a doctor should carry out euthanasia on a person's request and about the same percentage thought that 'it depends'. This means that almost 80 per cent were not fundamentally opposed to euthanasia. Only 13 per cent of the men and women in our sample

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thought that euthanasia should not be allowed under any circumstances. The low percentages of older adults who were not in principle opposed to abortion and euthanasia replicated the findings from a random sample of the Dutch population that included younger adults (World Values Study Group 1994, own calculations).[5] Although the percentages for men and women were almost similar, the distributions differed significantly for attitudes towards voluntary childlessness and euthanasia, with men being slightly more progressive than women.

To compute individual-scale scores for the moral attitude questions, we coded the answers 'acceptable', 'yes, there are' and 'yes, he should' for the three items as indicating 'moral progressiveness', and coded other answers as indicating 'conservatism'. After summing the scores for the three items, the resulting scale ranged from '0' to '3' (high scores indicating progressive moral attitudes). No scale score was assigned if a respondent did not answer all questions. Applying Mokken's (1971) hierarchical scaling model, the three items constituted a homogeneous scale among men (Loevinger's $H = 0.50$) and women ($H = 0.56$) and the reliabilities were $\rho = 0.62$ and $\rho = 0.68$ respectively. Men had significantly higher mean scale scores than women (1.8 *versus* 1.7), showing that men were slightly more progressive than women.

Analytical strategy and measures of the independent variables

Ordinary least-squares regression was used to assess the relationships between older adults' gender role and, on the one hand, moral attitudes, and on the other hand, the indicators for their parental backgrounds, own lifecourse experiences and their children's attitudes. Because the distribution of the scale for gender-role attitudes was skewed to the left, the residuals were not normally distributed (which violates an assumption of regression analysis). To overcome this problem of non-normality, the gender-role attitude scores were transformed by squaring. The problem of non-normality was far less severe for moral attitudes and no transformation was made.[6]

The principal independent variables were the indicators of parental background, the respondents' own marital and work histories, and their children's marital history and work characteristics (for definitional and descriptive information see Table 3). It should be noted that the measures of children's marital and work characteristics are composite variables. The great majority (88%) of the respondents had more than one child.[7] We therefore constructed a measure of whether at least one child had behaved unconventionally. Another point to be made is that when a respondent

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TABLE 3. *Measures, means and standard deviations of the independent variables*

Domains and variables	Men	Women
Parental background		
Parental education (highest of mother's or father's completed years of education, from 5 to 18 years of education)	7·32 (2.72)	7·47 (2.95)
Parents ever divorced/separated	0.04	0.03
Mother worked during youth (whether mother worked for over a year during R's youth)	0.19	0.16
Father's occupational level (skill level of father's last occupation, from '1' [elementary] to '5' [scientific])	2.69 (0.85)	2.77 (0.85)
Own marital and work history		
Never in union (either marriage or cohabitation)	0.03	0.06
No children if ever in union (whether R is childless. If never in union, '0' assigned)	0.07	0.09
Number of children (R's number of children, from 1 to 15. If no children, the average is assigned)	3.21 (1.89)	3.36 (2.05)
Ever cohabited (either before or without marriage. If never in union: '0' assigned)	0.10	0.06
Ever separated/divorced (if never in union: '0' assigned)	0.08	0.07
Never worked	0	0.13
Years worked if ever worked (if never worked: average)	41.22 (7.97)	18.09 (14.26)
Number of times out of the labour market if ever worked (if never worked: average)	0.44 (0.65)	0.16 (0.40)
Children's marital and work history (if children)		
A child cohabited (without marrying. If no children: '0' assigned)	0.37	0.39
A child divorced/separated (if no children: '0' assigned)	0.30	0.32
A daughter aged 25–55 years worked at time of survey (if no children/only sons: '0' assigned)	0.54	0.56
A son aged 25–55 years unemployed at time of survey (if no children/only daughters: '0' assigned)	0.09	0.11
Control variables		
Urbanisation of current place of residence (from '1' to '5' [very urban])	2.93 (1.42)	2.95 (1.44)
Age (years and months)	70.74 (7.92)	69.55 (8.38)
Education (completed education in years from 5 to 18 years)	9.53 (3.31)	8.27 (2.99)
Church membership (yes/no)	0.60	0.68

Notes: R: respondent. Standard deviations are presented in parentheses but not for dichotomous variables. The means were calculated on a sample including respondents with missing data on the dependent variables (but not on the independent variables). Some means were calculated for subsamples of the respondents, *i.e.* those ever in union, ever worked or having children.

could not by definition have experienced an event, he or she was assigned the most common value (for discrete variables) or the average (for continuous variables). For example, respondents who never entered a union could not have been divorced, so these respondents were assigned zero on the 'ever divorced' variable. As a result, the effect of 'never in union' represents the difference between respondents who never entered a union and those who entered a union and never divorced. The analyses also control for the respondent's educational attainment, age, church membership and

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the level of urbanisation of the area of residence (for details see Table 3). These control variables reflect the broader or societal influences on people's attitudes which previous studies have found important. Age may indicate both 'ageing' and 'cohort' effects in our cross-sectional design.

The independent variables were entered as a block, that is, all at once. In additional analyses we also estimated stepwise models. First, we entered only the control variables and subsequently added the indicators for parental background, respondents' own experiences and their children's. Although the variables for parental background, own experiences and children's experiences are likely to be correlated (*e.g.* through the intergenerational transmission of certain behaviours), the stepwise analyses did not yield substantially different results. Using *F* tests for the change in *R*-squared, the stepwise analyses also showed whether subsequently adding a block of variables led to a better model fit. The results of these tests are also shown in the tables.

Multivariate results

Table 4 shows the results for gender-role attitudes. For men, those with more education, those who were younger, and those who were not church members had more progressive attitudes. None of the indicators for parental background had a significant influence; and while men's marital histories had a significant effect, their work histories did not. Contrary to expectations, men who had never entered a union had less progressive attitudes than those who had. As only a few men had never entered a union, their conservative attitudes might be the result of marital selection. Alternatively, it might be that being in a union had led to more progressive attitudes in men: the experience of living with a woman might make men more sensitive towards men's and women's roles in general (Jansen and Kalmijn 2000), or men's attitudes might be influenced by their wives' during the marriage. Among men who had entered a union, those who were childless had more progressive gender-role attitudes, as did those with fewest children, which is in line with our hypotheses.

Turning to the children's experiences, it was found that having children who co-habited associated with more progressive gender-role attitudes, in line with our expectation. Also in line with the hypotheses is the finding that men who had a working daughter or a non-working son tended to have more progressive gender-role attitudes. The results of the *F* tests of the explained variance show that the overall influence of parental background was relatively weak: adding the several indicators did not lead to a significantly better model. The same held for men's own marital and work

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TABLE 4. *Regression of gender-role attitudes on parental background, respondents' marital and work history and their children's marital history and work characteristics by gender*

Variable or statistic	Men	Women
Control variables		
Urbanisation	−0.269	1.932
Age	−2.079**	−2.209**
Education	2.500**	6.908**
Church membership	−21.211**	−21.704**
Parental background		
Parental education	−0.275	0.460
Parents separated	−15.624	−1.658
Mother worked	9.451	13.017
Father's occupation	6.616	−1.719
Own marital and work history		
Never in union	−50.876**	12.517
No children	33.525**	−3.313
Number of children	−4.341*	−3.515*
Ever cohabited	5.475	−21.269
Ever separated	9.501	26.086*
Never worked		−25.262**
Years worked	0.622	0.003
Number of times out of work	7.197	3.178
Children's marital and work history		
A child cohabited	26.805**	29.531**
A child separated	−8.718	−0.429
A daughter works	17.836**	3.502
A son unemployed	19.655*	7.086
Model fit		
R squared	0.125	0.186
Adjusted R squared	0.104	0.167
F-change step 1[1]	1.137	0.922
F-change step 2	1.828	2.095*
F-change step 3	6.082**	4.271**
Sample size	802	878

Notes: Scale scores for gender-role attitudes are squared. The coefficients are b coefficients. 1. F-tests of whether subsequently adding the indicators for parental background (step 1), the indicators for own marital and work history (step 2) and the indicators for children's marital and work history (step 3) lead to a better model fit.
Significance levels: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$ (one-sided for b-coefficients, two-sided for F-change).

histories. The results were stronger for their children's marital and work histories, since adding these variables did improve the model, although it should be noted that the explained variance of the most complete model was relatively low (12 %).

Turning to the model for women, we first see that younger women, more educated women and women who were not church members had more progressive gender-role attitudes than others. With respect to the

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influence of parental background, none of the indicators were significantly related to women's gender-role attitudes. It was found that the number of children was significantly related to women's gender-role attitudes, as was whether a woman had experienced a divorce or separation. Consistent with our hypothesis, women with more children tended to be less progressive than women with fewer. Also in line with our hypotheses, divorced or separated women were found to be more progressive than others. Whether women had ever worked had a very strong association with gender-role attitudes: those who had never worked had less progressive gender-role attitudes than those who had, which supports our hypothesis. Finally, there was one significant coefficient for children's characteristics. Women whose children co-habited were more likely to have progressive gender-role attitudes than women whose children did not. Overall, the results of the F tests show that the effects of parental background were weak, whereas adding the indicators for women's own experiences and their children's led to significantly better models. The explained variance of the overall model for women was nearly double that for men ($R^2 = 0.19$).

The results for attitudes towards moral issues are shown in Table 5. For men, we see first that men coming from the most urban areas, younger and more educated men, and those who were not church members were more likely to have progressive attitudes on moral issues than others. The influence of parental background was again weak, with none of the indicators being significantly related to moral progressiveness. With respect to men's own marital and work experiences, it was shown that only marital history mattered. Contrary to expectations, men who had never entered a union had less progressive attitudes towards moral issues than men who did. As suggested earlier, this might be the result of either marital selection or the role of the partner. Among men who had entered a union, only the number of children had a significant relationship with moral progressiveness. Men with more children were less progressive than men with few, which is consistent with our hypothesis. Finally, we see that the relation between children's experiences and attitudes towards moral issues was limited to whether their children co-habited. As expected, men whose children co-habited were more progressive than those whose children did not co-habit. Overall, the F tests confirm that the influence of parental background was weak, whereas both men's own experiences and their children's experiences were related to the older men's attitudes on moral issues; adding variables for men's own and their children's marital and work histories produced a better model fit.

For women, we see that the level of urbanisation, their age, church membership and education were significantly related to their attitudes towards moral issues. With respect to parental background, none of the

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TABLE 5. *Regression of attitudes towards moral issues on parental background, respondents' marital and work history and their children's marital history and work characteristics by gender*

Variable or statistic	Men	Women
Control variables		
Urbanisation	0.067**	0.090**
Age	−0.016**	−0.017**
Education	0.043**	0.050**
Church membership	−0.706**	−0.656**
Parental background		
Parental education	0.001	0.019
Parents separated	0.080	−0.280
Mother worked	0.010	−0.092
Father's occupation	0.024	0.024
Own marital and work history		
Never in union	−0.662**	−0.032
No children	0.112	−0.050
Number of children	−0.079**	−0.093**
Ever cohabited	0.076	0.071
Ever separated	0.045	0.019
Never worked		0.008
Years worked	0.005	0.001
Number of times out of work	0.039	0.003
Children's marital and work history		
A child cohabited	0.251**	0.176*
A child separated	−0.035	0.184*
A daughter works	0.070	0.044
A son unemployed	0.062	0.054
Model fit		
R squared	0.278	0.285
Adjusted R squared	0.261	0.268
F-change step 1[1]	0.311	1.754
F-change step 2	4.218**	2.473*
F-change step 3	3.210*	4.428**
Sample size	808	881

Notes: The coefficients are b coefficients. 1. F-tests of whether subsequently adding the indicators for parental background (step 1), the indicators for own marital and work history (step 2) and the indicators for children's marital and work history (step 3) lead to a better model fit.
Significance levels: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$ (one-sided for b-coefficients, two-sided for F-change).

coefficients were significant. For their own experiences, however, women's marital history, but not their work history, was associated with moral progressiveness. Specifically, having more children was found to be associated with less progressive attitudes on moral issues, which is consistent with our hypothesis. With respect to the children's characteristics, two indicators were found to be associated with women's moral attitudes and the observed relationships were in the expected direction. Women whose children co-habited tended to be more progressive on moral issues than

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women whose children never co-habited. Also, women whose children had divorced or separated had more progressive attitudes than women whose children had not. Overall, the results of the *F* tests are in line with the earlier findings and show that the models were significantly improved when indicators for women's own and their children's marital and work histories were added.

Conclusion and discussion

This study has examined older adults' attitudes towards gender roles and moral issues, and it has assessed the relationships between these attitudes and both the respondents' experiences in the parental home and their own and their children's marital and work experiences. By doing so, we have shifted the focus from young to older adults and applied a broader life-course perspective than in previous attitude research. Our findings offer insights into whether and how the major structural changes during recent decades have affected older adults. We find that older adults tend to have progressive attitudes towards moral issues and gender roles. A large majority of older men and women think that an individual should have the freedom to make his or her own choices about voluntary childlessness, abortion and euthanasia. Similarly, most older adults support equality between men and women, with women being more progressive than men. The only exception is that one-half of women and about 70 per cent of men agree that women are more capable than men of raising young children. The high proportion of older adults with progressive attitudes challenges the common assumption that older adults are conservative and suggests that major societal changes have affected older adults' opinions.

The multivariate analyses gave indications of how these societal changes might have affected older adults' attitudes. Although the influence of parental background was found not to persist into late life, it has been shown that attitudes in late life are generally consistent with both people's lifecourse experiences during adulthood and their children's experiences. Consistent with the research evidence on young adults, it has been shown that a less conventional marital or work history is generally accompanied by more progressive attitudes on gender roles and moral issues in late life. People's childbearing history is particularly important. More importantly, we found suggestive evidence for the rarely tested claim that intergenerational influences are reciprocal – children's unconventional marital and work histories were associated with more progressive attitudes in elderly parents. In particular, co-habitation by the children was consistently found to be associated with more progressive attitudes on gender roles and moral

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issues. These findings suggest that an important mechanism by which societal changes affect older adults is through their reactions to their children's experiences, particularly since the demographic and cultural changes have been most profound among these younger generations.

Although in general it was found that attitudes were consistent with lifecourse experiences, it should be noted that the relationships differed by type of attitude and the sex of the respondent. Some lifecourse experiences, such as people's childbearing history and having co-habiting children, were consistently associated for both sexes with both gender-role attitudes and moral progressiveness. Other relationships held for just one attitude or one sex, *e.g.* work history was related to women's gender-role attitudes but not to their attitudes on moral issues. Another notable example was that the association between children's experiences and attitudes towards moral issues was stronger for women than men, whereas the opposite was true for the association with gender-role attitudes.

Our analyses have focused on attitudes towards gender roles, voluntary childlessness, abortion and euthanasia. We have argued that progressive attitudes go hand-in-hand with people's unconventional personal work and family experiences because both reflect the general principles of equality, freedom and autonomy (see Thornton and Young-DeMarco 2001). It is recognised in particular that the items we employed for attitudes towards moral issues were rather abstract, which might explain why some indicators of parental background and of the respondents' and their children's marital and work histories were not significantly related to the respondents' attitudes. If measures of attitudes towards more concrete or explicit behaviour had been used, as towards marriage, divorce or co-habitation, the observed relationships might have been stronger. Given the level of abstraction, our findings on the relationships between older adults' attitudes and both their own experiences during childhood and adulthood and their children's experiences are all the more convincing. Finally, our findings offer suggestive but important evidence on the question of whether people's own lifecourse experiences and their children's lead to attitudinal change. As previously explained, the cross-sectional design did not permit a causal interpretation but, given the strong associations that have been demonstrated, there is a strong case for a replication using a longitudinal design.

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NOTES

1 There is a substantial literature on these effects, using both age-group comparison and repeated cross-sectional designs, *e.g.* Oppenheim Mason and Lu 1988; Smith 1990; Dekker and Ester 1993; Becker *et al.* 1995; Scott 1998.

2 About 10 per cent of the original sample refused to participate, three per cent had deceased, four per cent were ineligible and one per cent could not be contacted. The follow-up was about 11 months after the LSN interviews. Data on attitudes were obtained from a written questionnaire. Because of non-response (n = 804), attitudinal data are only available for 2,303 respondents, although partial non-response led to fewer respondents having valid attitudinal data (see note 3).

3 We further excluded gay respondents (n = 7), respondents having children without ever entering a union (n = 2), and the only male respondent who had never worked. Of the remaining 1,764 respondents, 84 gave no answer to all questions on gender-role attitudes (valid n = 1,680), and 75 gave no answer to all questions on moral issues (valid n = 1,689).

4 The 1995 data (HIN95) used for these calculations comprised respondents aged between 18 and 79 years and contained two of the items on gender-role attitudes. About 91 per cent of the women and 87 per cent of the men in this sample (fully) disagreed with the statement that 'it is not natural for women to supervise men in a company'. For the item about whether women are more fitted to raise young children, 36 per cent of the men (fully) agreed and 20 per cent of the women. The other items on gender-role attitudes in the HIN95 differed slightly from those in Table 1, and we were unable to locate Dutch publications or data that had asked precisely the same questions.

5 The Dutch data from the 1990–1993 edition of the *World Values Surveys* were used. The respondents' ages ranged from 18 to 89 years: they were asked to indicate whether they thought that abortion or euthanasia could 'never be justified', 'always be justified' or 'in between', on a scale from '1' (never) to '10' (always). Although these items were not exactly the same as those in Table 2, *i.e.* they are continuous instead of discrete measures, we computed the most comparable percentages of those who thought that abortion/euthanasia can never be justified. It was found that 14 per cent of women and 12 per cent of men thought that abortion is never justified, and the comparable percentages for euthanasia were 12 and 13 per cent respectively.

6 We also experimented with other scales, including latent class analyses as in the Latent Gold program (Vermunt and Magidson 2000) which can handle nominal data (like the moral items). This type of analysis distinguished progressive and conservative respondents, but logistic regressions with these dichotomised attitudes yielded similar results to those in Tables 4 and 5. Furthermore, the Likert-scale for gender-role attitudes that we used is a standard approach to compute scale-scores for such ordinal items, and for both types of attitudes, we found that the respective items constituted a reasonably homogeneous and reliable scale.

7 Children who had died were excluded, but step- or adopted children were included. Of the 1,555 respondents with children, about 97 per cent had only consanguineous

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children, one per cent had only step- or adopted children, and two per cent had both. The children's ages ranged from 13 to 77 years, with an average of 35 years for the youngest and 42 years for the eldest.

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