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***Father-Child Relations:***

***Continuity and Change from Adolescence to Adulthood***

***Results from the German LifE-Study***

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## 1. Introduction - Fathers Are Important

Studies and the general understanding traditionally assume that fathers, unlike mothers, play only a peripheral role in their children's lives. There is no doubt that fathers are, on average, less involved with their children than mothers. This situation is probably not going to change, at least in the near future. Nevertheless, the *distinctive contribution of fathers* to the development of their children should not be underestimated. A growing number of studies show the important role that fathers play in the development of their children. In an optimal father-child relationship fathers manage to contribute to the well-being of their children by providing warm support, promoting their children's autonomous identity and their independence, and by serving as models for interaction with the extra-familial world (e.g., Shulman & Seiffge-Krenke, 1996; Snarey, 1993). The father's absence proves to contribute decisively to a lower well-being and lower academic attainment of children and adolescents. The few studies that have examined the importance of fathers for adult children support the notion that fathers remain salient figures for their children's well-being even in adulthood (e.g., Amato, 1994; Roberts & Bengtson, 1993). In general, fathers keep in close contact with their adult offspring, and both aged fathers and adult children express high levels of regard for one another (Berger & Fend, 2005; Buhl, 2000; Rossi & Rossi, 1990; Schneewind & Ruppert, 1995; Thornton, Orbuch, & Axinn, 1995; Tubman & Lerner, 1994; Umberson, 1992).

## 2. Research Questions – Continuity and Change in Father-Child Relations from Adolescence to Adulthood

In this paper, I adopt a life course perspective to consider how father-child relations develop from adolescence to adulthood. A critical question in this context is the extent to which the early history of a father-child relationship determines its future. Do childhood patterns of parent-child interactions shape adult intergenerational relations? In addition to the extent of *continuity* in father-child relations the life course factors that may lead to *change* over time are investigated.

The following questions are particularly focused on:

1. Do patterns of child-rearing and parent-child relations during adolescence exert a long-term influence on the relationship between fathers and their adult children? Special attention will be given to the consequences of *parental divorce*.
2. What are the sources of discontinuity and stress in daughter-father and son-father relations in adulthood? Here I focus on individual *life course transitions and critical life events of both generations*.

### 3. Theoretical Perspectives

My approach to the study of continuity and change in father-child relations is guided by the following theoretical perspectives:

The *social learning theory* and the *attachment theory* are the key concepts for the understanding of continuity in intergenerational relationships (e.g., Antonucci & Akiyama, 1994; Aquilino, 1997; Bowlby, 1978).

The *social learning* view is that patterns of conflict, negotiation, and communication learned early in life persist over time and that learned patterns are invoked when new or ambiguous situations occur (e.g., the growing dependency of elderly parents).

The *attachment theory* postulates that early experiences of attachment and care within the parent-child relationship are internalized in models of self and of relationships to others. Although additional attachments may develop throughout life, early models of attachments endure and pre-structure forthcoming relations.

The main theoretical perspectives for understanding discontinuity in father-child relations are the *concept of the dual dynamics of family development*, the *individuation theory*, the *stress theory*, and the *concept of intergenerational similarity* (e.g., Bengtson & Black, 1973; Elder, 1985; Grotevant & Cooper, 1986; Zarit & Eggebeen, 2002).

The *concept of the dual dynamic of family development* suggests that life events in one generation have significant effects on life events of the succeeding generations. However, it is not just the life course transitions of children or their parents that matter. What also matters is how they interlock (Elder, 1985). For example, the ability or the desire of parents to help their adult child cope with a newborn may be strongly moderated by the events in their own lives at that time (e.g., their physical health and their own need for care). Parent-child relationships are lifelong interactions between individuals shaped by the respective biographies and family, social, economic and historical contexts.

The *individuation theory* postulates that, as children move through adolescence, parent-child relations must be renegotiated (Grotevant & Cooper, 1986). In order to be granted a substantial say in decision-making, adolescents seek peer-like relationships with their parents. It is at this point in the life course that reciprocity in parent-child relations becomes crucial. The relationship is supposed to move from the child depending on its parents to interdependence. Reciprocity should be accompanied by a decrease in parent-child conflicts concerning issues of everyday life and a lessening of parental attempts to control their children's behaviour. Reciprocity also lies in the ability of each member of the dyad to find pleasure in the other's company and to forge a relationship marked by affection (Aquilino, 1997).

Life course perspective and individuation theory provide a broad framework for viewing family interactions and change in intergenerational relations. In turn, the *stress theory* and the *concept of intergenerational similarity* can illuminate the process of adaptation of individuals and families to critical life events and to role transitions.

The *stress theory* argues that stressors such as divorce and illness affect individual well being and as a consequence alter relationships between family members. For example, divorce is often associated with a decrease in the quantity and quality of contact between children and

non-custodial fathers and with other difficult events for children, such as moving, changing schools, losing contact with grandparents, and parental remarriage (Amato & Keith, 1991).

The *intergenerational similarity hypothesis* proposed by Bengtson and Black (1973) suggests that when grown children move into adult roles (such as wife or husband and parent), their roles and experiences become similar to the roles and experiences of their parents. The expectation is that the increasing similarity of life experiences will strengthen parent-child relations and ease the way for more adult-like mutuality in the relationship (Aquilino, 1997). Becoming a parent, for example, should be linked to higher levels of emotional closeness and to an increase in shared activities (when geographic distance is controlled).

#### 4. Previous Research

The few empirical studies that have addressed *continuity* (e.g., Aquilino, 1997; Rossi & Rossi, 1990; Schneewind & Ruppert, 1995; Tubman & Lerner, 1994) provide support for the notion that intergenerational relations in adulthood are influenced by relationship patterns established when children were adolescents. However, the effects of earlier patterns of interactions on the relationship later in life are moderate. Furthermore they vary from one parent-child dyad to the next, the mother-daughter dyad being the one with the greatest continuity and the mother-son dyad the one with the least continuity (Rossi & Rossi, 1990; Schneewind & Ruppert, 1995).

Results from the studies of Tubman and Lerner (1994) and Rossi and Rossi (1990) suggest that the predictive power of earlier patterns of family interaction diminishes as children grow older. This points to the fact that *a new set of factors becomes relevant in influencing the relationship between parents and children* when children move into adulthood. These factors may include children's life course transitions as well as transitions and critical events in the lives of the parents. A deterioration in a parent's health, for example, proved to have negative effects on the quality of intergenerational relationships in different studies (Kaufman & Uhlenberg, 1998; Whitbeck, Simons, & Conger, 1991).

The most consistent finding is that *divorce of parents* in childhood or adolescence (as well as divorce of parents later in life) has long lasting negative consequences on the parent-child relationship (e.g., Amato & Booth, 1996; Aquilino, 1994a, 1994b; Booth & Amato, 1994; Cooney, 1994).

In addition, results known up to now give strong support for the argument that the gender of the parent and the gender of the child play a central role in studies of intergenerational relationships. Several *differences by gender* have been found. For example, females seem to be more involved than males in maintaining intergenerational relationships and father-child relationships were found to be less close and less supportive, but more affected by parental divorce than mother-child relations (e.g., Amato & Booth, 1996; Buhl, 2000; Schneewind & Ruppert, 1995; Thornton et al., 1995).

## 5. Causal Model of Pathways from Family Life in Adolescence to Dimensions of Father-Child Solidarity in Adulthood

Based on the above exemplified theoretical perspectives and on extensive work of Rossi and Rossi (1990) as well as of Bengtson and colleagues (e.g., Bengtson & Roberts, 1991; Lawton, Silverstein, & Bengtson, 1994; Roberts, Richards, & Bengtson, 1991), a causal model of pathways from family life in adolescence to dimensions of father-child solidarity in adulthood is proposed. The model assigns a causal priority to intergenerational *affection and conflict as rooted in early family experiences*. Together, these variables are expected to have demonstrable persistent effects on the emotional quality of the relationship between fathers and their adult children in later years. Last in the causal sequence are the *frequency of social interaction and the exchange of help* between the generations.

In this model, *intergenerational affection in later life* is supposed to be more responsive to adolescents' experiences than is frequency of contact and instrumental help between the generations. The latter are necessarily also a function of *opportunities*, the pressure of *current life circumstances*, and the *needs of both generations*. Whether parents and adult children share time together and exchange help may be partially determined by early family life, but of more importance will be the direction the child's and the parents' lives have taken as a function of educational attainment, geographical mobility, role transitions, and critical life events (Rossi & Rossi, 1990).

Special attention in this model is given to the impact of *parental divorce* in childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood on the intergenerational solidarity between fathers and their adult children.

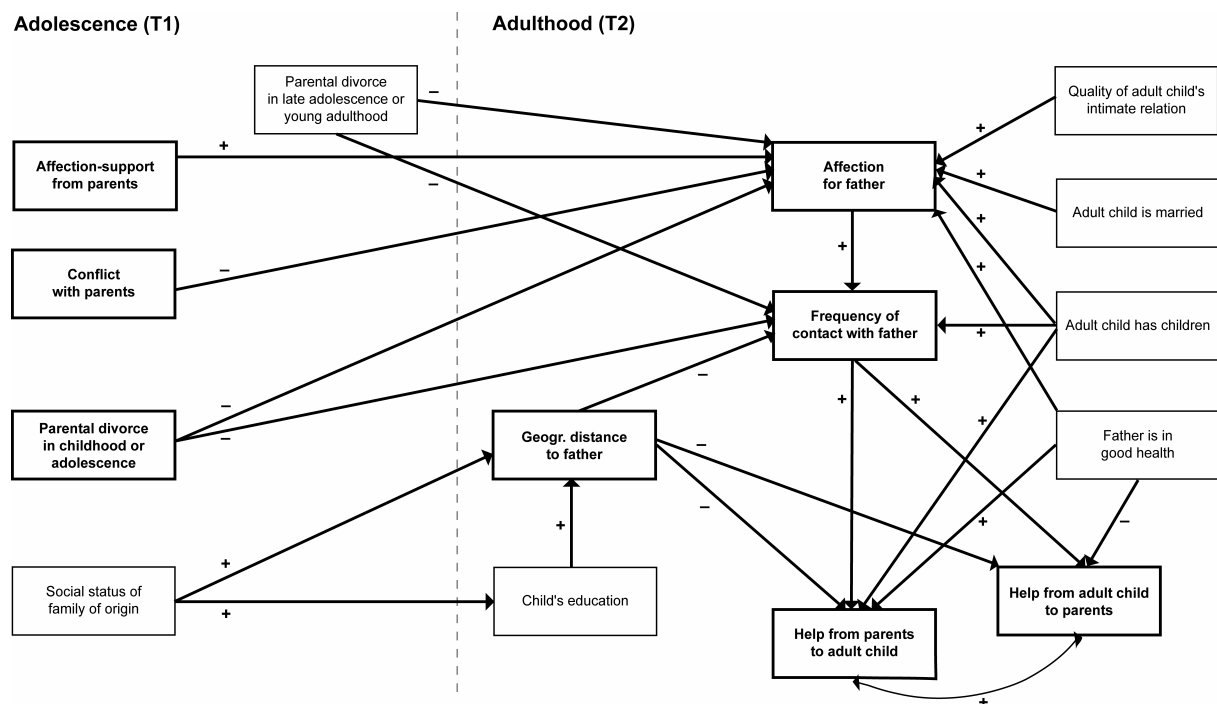


Figure 1: Causal Model of Pathways of Family Life in Adolescence to Dimensions of Father-Child Solidarity in Adulthood.

## 6. Sample of Analysis – The German Life-Study

The analysis is based on data from the *German longitudinal Life-Study* (Fend, Georg, Berger, Grob, & Lauterbach, 2002) with a sample size of  $N=1527$ . The Life-Study is representative with respect to marital status and birth rate for the cohort of 30 through 39 years old in Western Germany. Individuals with lower educational achievement and of non-German citizenship are slightly under-represented.

In 1982 a self-administered questionnaire was given to the then 15.6 years old individuals. In 2002 the sample was contacted again and mailed a survey questionnaire. At this point in time participants were 35.4 years of age on average ( $SD=0.57$ ).

The target population for this analysis consists of 538 females and 510 males who reported on the relationship with their fathers at both points of measurement.

## 7. Measures

The proposed causal model consists of the following 15 manifest variables.

Dimensions of father-child solidarity in adulthood:

*Affectual solidarity* (5 items,  $\alpha = .85$ )

The extent to which the relation between the adult child and the father reflects involvement and affection. Items were adapted from the Furman and Buhrmester (1985) instrument of personal relationships and social networks and from the Schneewind and Ruppert (1992) inventory of parent-child relations and marital quality.

*Associational solidarity* (1 item, 1 to 7 response scale)

Frequency of interaction (i.e., face-to-face, telephone, mail) between the adult child and the father.

*Functional solidarity* (2 items, 1 to 5 response scale)

Frequency of instrumental assistance from adult child to parents (e.g., shopping, cleaning, care) respectively from parents to adult child (e.g., child care, shopping).

Aspects of parent-child relation in adolescence:

*Affection-support* (4 items,  $\alpha = .82$ )

Adolescents reported receiving affection and help from their parents, having intimate talks with them, and relying upon them. Items come from the Fend and Prester (1986) instrument on parent-child relations in adolescence.

*Conflict* (1 item, 1 to 5 response scale)

Extent of disagreement, arguing, and shouting in the parent-child relationship (Fend & Prester, 1986).

Critical life events and role transitions of both generations:

*Parental divorce* was reported by the children at both points of measurement.

The *quality of children's intimate relationships* was assessed in 2002 with nine items adapted from the Furman and Buhrmester (1985) and the Schneewind and Ruppert (1992) inventories. Items measure conflict and disagreement as well as closeness and intimacy in adult children's intimate relationships ( $\alpha = .88$ ). The scale is split into two groups with good vs. poor quality of relationship.

*Marital status* and *parenthood* were assessed through adult children's responses at time point two.

The *overall well-being (health) of the father* was reported by the adult children (1 item, 1 to 5 response scale).

Opportunity structure and education:

The *geographic distance* between the child's and the father's home was asked for in kilometres (logarithmized).

The *social status of family of origin* was assessed through children's information on the vocational training of their father or mother. Coding System of Kleining and Moore (1968).

The *child's education* respectively the child's vocational training was reported in 2002 by the adult child and coded according to the Wegener Prestige Scale (1988).

## **8. Procedure of Analysis**

In order to test the model in figure 1 a *multi-sample path analysis* in AMOS 5 across the daughter-father and son-father relation was specified.

Since the initial model did not fit satisfactorily it had to be adjusted to the data taking into consideration that all the structural coefficients were meaningful and substantively interpretable.

In a next step, cross-group equality constraints were specified in order to test all structural coefficients for group differences. Parameters that did not differ between the two groups of father-child relations were constrained (Kline, 2005).

The model fit of the final model is good (see figure 2 and 3). All exogenous variables in the final model were free to correlate. In addition, the quality of the adult children's intimate relation, their marital status, and their parental status were controlled for educational level.

Average rate of missing values per variable is 8%. Missing values were estimated with the Full Information Maximum Likelihood Method (Wothke, 1999).

## 9. Results

Figure 2 and 3 display the results of the multi-sample path analysis for both father-child relations. Note that only statistically significant ( $p < .05$ ) coefficients of minimum .10 in at least one of the two dyads are shown in the figures. The full set of structural coefficients is reported in table 1 in the appendix. Asterisks in figure 2 and 3 indicate significantly different parameter estimates between the two father-child dyads (\* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$ ).

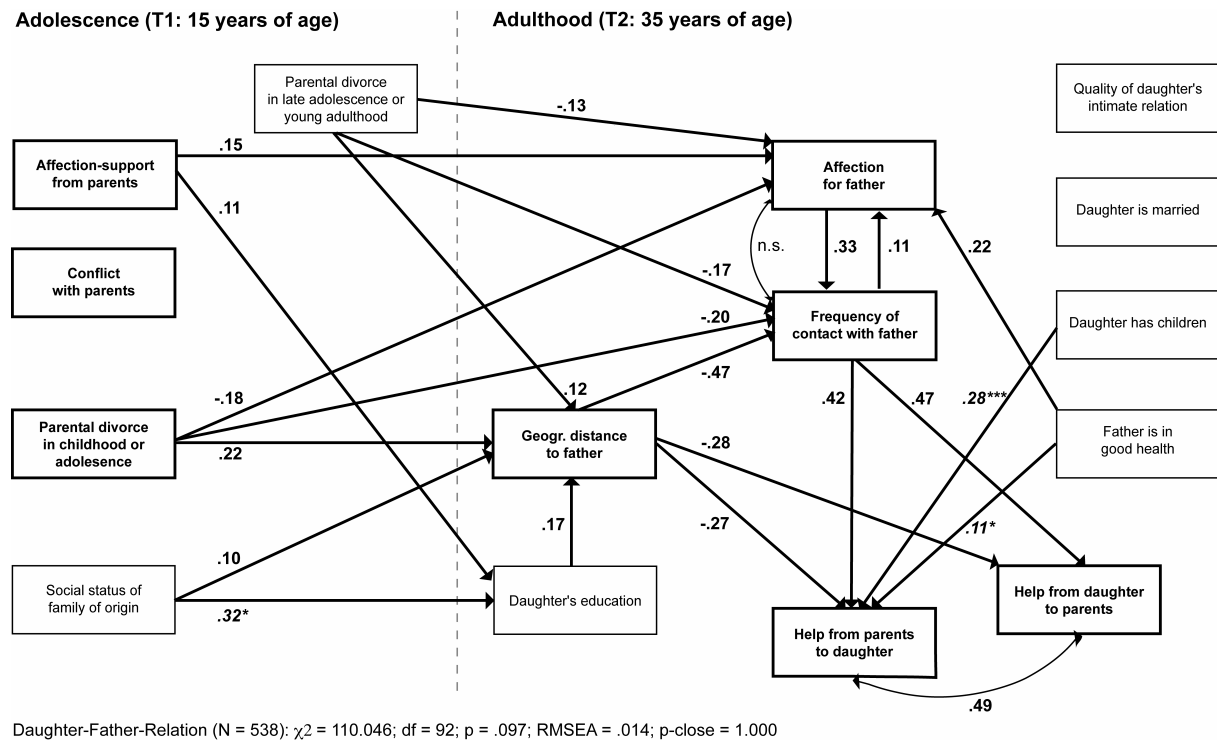


Figure 2: Causal Model of Pathways of Family Life in Adolescence to Dimensions of *Daughter-Father* Solidarity in Adulthood. Standardized Maximum Likelihood Estimates of Structural Coefficients.

The results outline that there is some *continuity in the father-child relationship* from adolescence to middle adulthood. The effects of earlier patterns of family interactions on the emotional quality of the relationship later in life are rather moderate, however, and do not show statistically significant differences between the two father-child dyads.

A warm and supportive parent-child relationship in adolescence proves to be predictive of positive father-child relations and higher educational attainments of children later in life.

In accordance with many other studies we find a *strong long-lasting effect of parental divorce* in childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood on the father-child relation later in life (see paragraph 4). In the long run, divorce erodes affection between fathers and children and leads to a greater geographic distance and a reduction of contact and shared activities. This turns out to be true for the daughter-father as well as for the son-father relation.

Complementary analysis of mother-child relations show that divorce doesn't weaken the children's affection for their mothers. However, divorce does increase geographic distance and reduce social interactions between children and mothers (results not displayed).



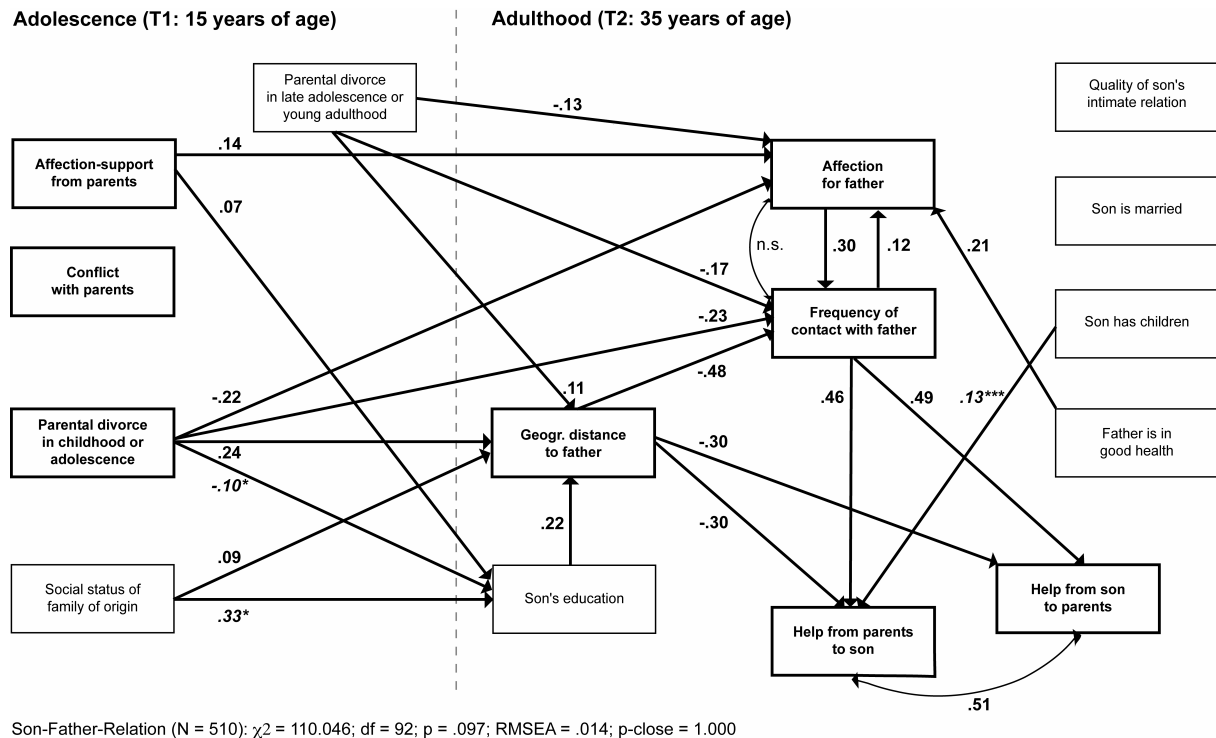


Figure 3: Causal Model of Pathways of Family Life in Adolescence to Dimensions of *Son-Father* Solidarity in Adulthood. Standardized Maximum Likelihood Estimates of Structural Coefficients.

Parental divorce in childhood or adolescence also exerts an influence on the sons' educational attainments, whereas it doesn't on the daughters'. The father's presence seems to be an important contextual resource with regard to the educational achievement of the male child.

Contrary to our expectations, the quality of *children's intimate relationship and their marital status* were not (or only to a marginal degree) linked to the father-child relation in adulthood. Though, as expected, *fathers' overall physical and mental well-being* turned out to be of predictive power for the emotional quality of the father-child relationship in adulthood.

Furthermore, results show that *intergenerational exchange* is very much depending upon the opportunities of both generations to meet and on the needs of individual family members for assistance.

*Geographic distance* proved to be a very powerful predictor of frequency of contact and of mutual exchange of assistance in adulthood.<sup>1</sup>

*Parenthood* turned out to be an important motive for the parent generation to assist their adult children. This seems to be especially true for the help offered to daughters. But it is interesting to note that, according to the study, parental assistance for sons is less conditioned by the parents' physical well-being than is assistance for daughters.

Last but not least, analyses unfold that *affection and social interactions* mutually reinforce each other. Frequent contacts between adult children and their fathers increase their emotional bond in adulthood. However, the frequency of contact and the level of help exchanged between fathers and adult children are to a higher degree affected by long-standing

<sup>1</sup> In accordance with many studies we did not find a direct effect of geographic distance on the affective closeness between the generations (e.g., Rossi & Rossi, 1990).

characteristics of their relationship that go back to the time when they shared their daily lives in the same household than is emotional closeness by contemporary social contact and exchange. Affective closeness of contemporary father-adult child relationships is the dimension of solidarity most deeply rooted in early family life (Rossi & Rossi, 1990, S. 266).

## **10. Summary and Conclusion**

This study demonstrates the ability of life course transitions, critical life events, and opportunity structures to change father-child relationships in adulthood. What fathers and their adult children do and feel for each other is a complex matter that includes numerous factors such as sheer accessibility to each other, the needs of the recipients of help, and the resources and competing demands on the donors of that help.

But apart from these factors, whether fathers and adult children feel emotionally close and share their time is also partially determined by their early history of interaction in childhood and adolescence (e.g., Rossi & Rossi, 1990). In accordance with previous research this study detected stability in intergenerational relationships over a range of 20 years and found a strong long-lasting effect of parental divorce.

Differences between the compared father-child dyads concerning stability and change proved to be rather small, however.

## 11. Literature

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## 12. Appendix

Table 1: Maximum Likelihood Parameter Estimates for Analysis of a Causal Model of Pathways of Family Life in Adolescence to Dimensions of Father-Child Solidarity in Adulthood across Samples of Daughter-Father and Son-Father Relations.

Parameter	Daughter-Father Relation		Son-Father Relation	
	Unstandardized	Standardized	Unstandardized	Standardized
<b>Equality-constrained estimates</b>				
Affection-support from parents T1 → Affection for father T2	.15***	.15	.15***	.14
Affection-support from parents T1 → Child's education T2	.77**	.11	.77**	.07
Conflict with parents T1 → Affection for father T2	-.27*	-.08	-.27*	-.08
Parental divorce before T1 → Affection for father T2	-2.36***	-.18	-2.36***	-.22
Parental divorce before T1 → Freq. of contact with father T2	-1.12***	-.20	-1.12***	-.23
Parental divorce before T1 → Geogr. distance to father T2	1.38***	.22	1.38***	.24
Parental divorce before T1 → Help from child to parents T2	.24**	.06	.24**	.07
Social status of family of origin T1 → Affection for father T2	.24*	.07	.24*	.07
Social status of family of origin T1 → Geogr. distance to father T2	.17*	.10	.17*	.09
Social status of family of origin T1 → Help from parents to child T2	.07*	.05	.07*	.05
Parental divorce between T1 - T2 → Affection for father T2	-1.83***	-.13	-1.83***	-.13
Parental divorce between T1 - T2 → Freq. of contact with father T2	-1.07***	-.17	-1.07***	-.17
Parental divorce between T1 - T2 → Geogr. distance to father T2	.84***	.12	.84***	.11
Parental divorce between T1 - T2 → Help from child to parents T2	.18*	.04	.18*	.04
Geogr. distance to father T2 → Freq. of contact with father T2	-.41***	-.47	-.41***	-.48
Geogr. distance to father T2 → Help from child to parents T2	-.17***	-.28	-.17***	-.30
Geogr. distance to father T2 → Help from parents to child T2	-.19***	-.27	-.19***	-.30
Child's education T2 → Geogr. distance to father T2	.01***	.17	.01***	.22
Child's education T2 → Help from child to parents T2	-.002**	-.05	-.002**	-.07
Affection for father T2 → Freq. of contact with father T2	.14***	.33	.14***	.30
Freq. of contact with father T2 → Affection for father T2	.25*	.11	.25*	.12
Freq. of contact with father T2 → Help from child to parents T2	.32***	.47	.32***	.49
Freq. of contact with father T2 → Help from parents to child T2	.34***	.42	.34***	.46
Quality of child's intimate relation T2 → Affection for father T2	.66**	.08	.66**	.09
Adult child has children T2 → Freq. of contact with father T2	.27***	.08	.27***	.09
Father is in good health T2 → Affection for father T2	.93***	.22	.93***	.21
<b>Unconstrained estimates</b>				
Conflict with parents T1 → Help from child to parents T2	-.07*	-.08	.05	.05
Parental divorce before T1 → Child's education T2	2.13	.02	-11.03*	-.10
Social status of family of origin T1 → Child's education T2	7.97***	.32	12.36***	.33
Adult child has children T2 → Help from parents to child T2	.73***	.28	.31***	.13
Father is in good health T2 → Help from parents to child T2	.15***	.11	.01	.01

Note: Table values are unstandardized and standardized maximum likelihood estimates of structural coefficients. Significance tests are two-tailed: \*p<.05; \*\*p<.01; \*\*\*p<.001

Equality-constrained estimates do not differ between the two father-child dyads, whereas unconstrained estimates are statistically significant different (p<.05).

Model fit: N<sub>(Daughter-Father Relation)</sub> = 538; N<sub>(Son-Father Relation)</sub> = 510;  $\chi^2 = 110.046$ ; df = 92; p = .097; RMSEA = .014; p-close = 1.000