

4.2 Generations and Gender Programme: A Research Infrastructure For Analyzing Relationships over the Life-Course

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Introduction

The GGP is a cross-national research infrastructure that was established in 2001 and which aims at understanding how the lives of individuals evolve over the whole life course, from young adulthood to older ages (more information can be found on our website: www.ggp-i.org). It furthermore aims at understanding the ways in which various factors, such as public policy, affect family life including the relationships between generations and between genders. It is a research infrastructure built on the principle of open access. It provides comparable micro-level data from 19 countries as well as related contextual data. In this paper, we first provide an overview of the GGP including its key features (i.e. what is the GGP?) and its capabilities (i.e. why do we need a GGP?). We then provide examples of some of its scientific accomplishments as well as its potential in terms of answering emerging research questions. We then discuss the way forward including our strategic plan through to 2020.

What is the Generations and Gender Programme?

In a nutshell, the GGP is best defined as a “harmonized, large-scale, longitudinal, cross-national panel study of individuals & contextual database”. It is a longitudinal panel study covering the whole life course from 18 to 79 years of age. It collects both retrospective information on topics such as fertility, family formation and dissolution, as well as prospective information collected through subsequent waves of the survey, allowing us to see changes in people’s lives over time. It is also a large-scale project involving data collection from about 10000 individuals per country (including both men and women). Such large sample sizes are necessary to study specific population subgroups such as migrants or people at the extreme ends of the income distribution, as well as to capture a sufficiently large number of life-events for statistical analyses.

The GGP is also a cross-national project currently covering 19 countries with data harmonized in a large database for cross-national comparisons. Moreover, 12 of these 19 countries have carried out subsequent waves of data collection (on the same individuals) allowing us to see changes over time in a variety of contexts. Finally, the micro-level data are also complemented by a contextual database providing information about policies and the economic environment at the regional and country-level that may affect individuals.

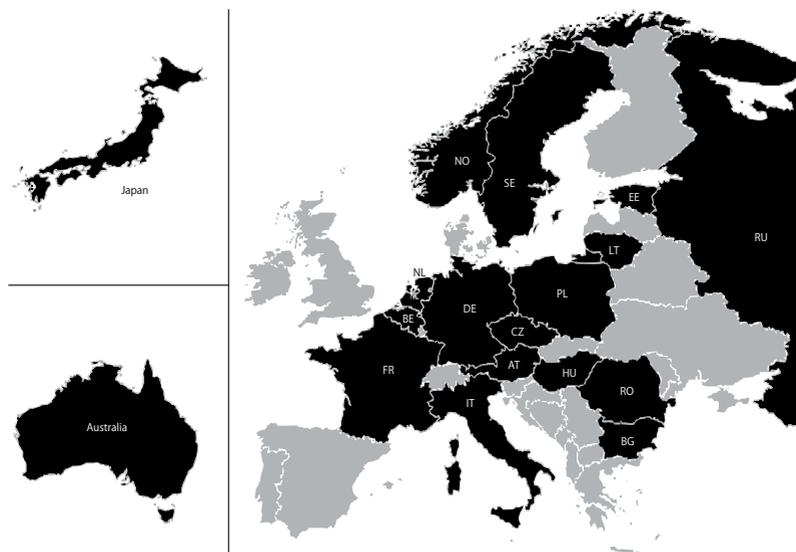


Figure 1: Participating Countries in the Generations and Gender Programme¹

The GGP covers a wide range of topics and collects data on: fertility and partnership histories, transition to adulthood, work-family balance, gender relations and gender division of housework, intergenerational exchange including informal and formal care, well-being and health, grandparenthood, and economic activity and retirement.

As a research infrastructure, the GGP is built on the principle of open access. Micro-level data can be downloaded directly from the web after researchers have been granted access through a centralized registration and accreditation

¹ Note: Australia, Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Estonia, France, Georgia, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Japan, Lithuania, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Romania, Russia, Sweden

process. Meta-information and online analysis is possible for anyone through the NESSTAR system. Our Contextual Database contains information on more than 200 harmonized indicators, and tracks population trends and policy changes in 60 countries over the past 40 years. Both as a stand-alone tool for analysis and as a supplement to the individual-level database, this dataset is a powerful analytical component of the infrastructure which enables us to understand individuals' relationships and personal histories in the context of policy developments and social change.

The number of registered users for the GGP micro-level data has increased rapidly over the years and has now exceeded 1,800. Users come from a large number of social science disciplines and from more than 30 different countries, and include both young and more established scholars. The GGP appears on the roadmap of the Netherlands and Norway, and is on the path to inclusion in France. It is governed by a consortium board of twelve academic institutions and research institutes from 10 countries, and a Council of Partners with representatives from 34 countries, an Advisory Board, and an international coordination team located at the Netherlands Interdisciplinary Demographic Institute in The Hague.

Why we need the Generations and Gender Programme

The increasing complexity of individuals' life-courses

To illustrate the essence of the GGP, let us first introduce Sylvia. She was born in 1955. She finished high school and became a secretary at the age of 18, met her future husband that year, got engaged at the age of 19, married at the age of 20, and had her first child at the age of 21. She went on to have a total of three children and lived happily ever after (Hicks, 2008). What is notable is that all of her key life transitions were concentrated early in life and within a very short time period. Her life story resembles that of many other women born about the same time. In our jargon, we say that her life story was standardized in that it followed a standard sequence and timing of events (Billari and Wilson 2001; Elzinga and Liefbroer 2007).

Now, let's contrast this to the life story of her middle daughter, Julia, who was born in 1978. Julia studied longer than her mother and eventually graduated with a post-secondary degree at the age of 23. While she was still a student, Julia had left home to live with friends at the age of 19, something her mother

has never done. She then moved in with a boyfriend, ended up having a child with this partner at the age of 28, and eventually married the father of her child at the age of 30. What is very clear here is that Julia's key life transitions were much less concentrated in time than those of her mother. While her mother finished school, got married, and had her first child all within a 3-year period, Julia had an interval of 11 years between leaving home and having her first child. In technical terms, Julia's life story was de-standardized in that it followed a much less standard sequence and timing of events.

So, why do these two stories matter? They matter because they reflect different sets of norms and opportunities associated with different decades and different cohorts of adults. They also matter because they have very large consequences for the context in which children are born and they have consequences for the relationships between generations and between genders. This is precisely what the GGP is about.

Findings to date

The scientific accomplishments of the GGP are numerous. The GGP has contributed important knowledge on the changing context of parenthood and child-bearing, such as the question of who has children outside of marriage. For example, analyses with GGP data have supported the long held belief that having a first child outside marriage is more prevalent among those with lower levels of education. Amongst the lower education groups in the Netherlands 45% of births occur outside marriage. Yet amongst those with higher levels of education, just 29% of births occur outside marriage (Perelli-Harris et al. 2010). However, in some countries, such as France, this is no longer true and it is in fact those with higher education who are more likely to have a child outside of marriage. Whether or not this pattern will spread to other countries, and whether or not it is influenced by the legal and institutional framework affecting families, are key research questions that researchers are looking to answer with the GGP. Answering these questions will enable us to understand what marriage and parenthood mean in the 21st century. Why do we get married? Why do we have kids? And what have the two got to do with each other?

Another example comes from our research on intergenerational relationships. The GGP has been used to show how loneliness in older ages is more prevalent in Eastern than Western Europe (Gierveld and Van Tilburg 2010). This is attributable to the greater health and wealth of older generations in Western Europe and the extent to which it helps them combat loneliness. The GGP has

also revealed that older generations are not just vulnerable but also play an important part in supporting younger generations. In some countries, such as Hungary, grandparents providing child care support was found to be important for young women who want to return to work after having a child. Yet in other countries, like the Netherlands, this didn't affect the woman's decision to work (Aassve et al. 2012). Future research will be able to examine whether this is because of culture, policy or other factors. These are just two of the many ways in which the GGP has demonstrated the complexity and diversity of relationships between generations as well as the need to consider this diversity in different countries.

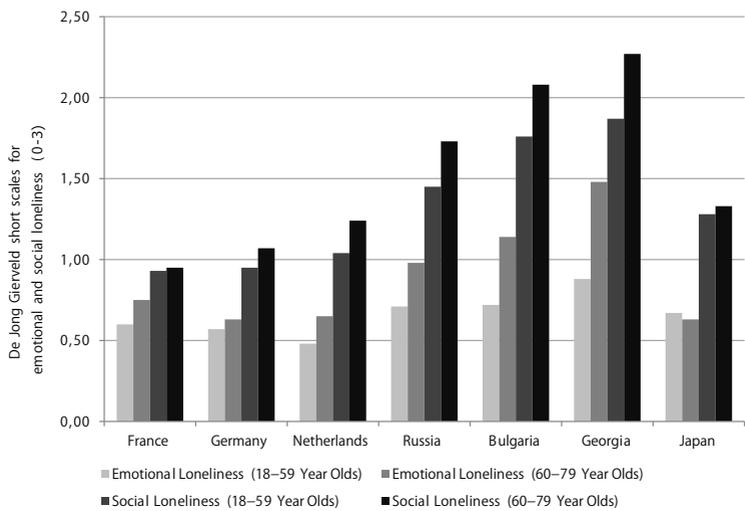


Figure 2: Loneliness amongst Older & Younger Persons in 7 Countries²

2 Source: Adapted from Gierveld, J. D. J. and Van Tilburg, T. (2010): The De Jong Gierveld short scales for emotional and social loneliness: Tested on data from 7 countries in the UN generations and gender surveys. *European Journal of Ageing*.

Future Research Questions

As a research infrastructure, the GGP will be essential for answering emerging scientific questions. In particular, there are two key questions that are going to be pivotal to our work in the coming years. The first one concerns the short- and long-term impact of the economic crisis. Since the crisis unfolded in 2008, European governments and the media have paid much attention to the fate of the unemployed, especially among young adults. However, we have little information on the long-term impacts of the crisis on the life-course of individuals. By continuously tracking young adults through subsequent waves of the GGP, we will be able to see the consequences of the crisis on the life-course of individuals and of their families. For example, to what extent has the experience of the crisis forced people to postpone having children, or prevented them from having children at all? And what does unemployment and a delay in leaving home mean for later relationships between young adults and their ageing parents? These are some of the questions that we hope to answer with future waves of the GGP.

The second key aspect concerns the long term effects of childhood and youth experiences. Research has shown that disadvantages in childhood and early adulthood have consequences in later-life. For example, having a child at a young age or outside a stable relationship has been shown to affect one's health, wealth and well-being much later in life (Lucas 2007). What is not known, however, is whether the impact of such negative effects weaken or accumulate over time. Moreover, some social scientists suspect that these negative effects of early life events may vary across countries as a result of different institutions and policies (Peters and Liefbroer 1997). This is because, in some countries, those in challenging circumstances are better supported by welfare arrangements than in others. With data from 19 countries, the GGP is a leading source of information on how best to support individuals through many of life's challenges because it follows individuals in a wide variety of circumstances.

The way forward

Since its inception in 2001, the development of the GGP has strongly relied on the commitment of the participating institutions and been funded from the bottom up. At the national level, participating institutions have put major efforts into fundraising in order to implement data collection at the national micro- and macro-level. Most funding is being provided either by national governments, statistical offices, or national science foundations. In addition, some institutions

have invested considerable funds in data collection from their own resources. At the international level, the coordination and development of the GGP was funded exclusively by participating Consortium Board institutions until 2007. In 2007, a grant totalling € 230k for the 2007–2008 period from EU-DG Employment to the UNECE, which was coordinating the programme at the time, allowed for an acceleration of the programme development. The EU-DG Research Grant 'Design Studies for Research Infrastructures' within the 7th Framework Programme in 2009 signified a major change in the tempo of development and led to a rethinking of the programme's long-term strategy. This EU-FP7 Design Study totalled € 2M for the 2009–2012 period and has been used to assess the state of the programme's methodological components and the preparation of a blueprint for the future of the GGP.

A challenging funding environment

Maintaining a research infrastructure is expensive. It includes high data collection costs at the national level as well as substantial coordination costs at the international level. The costs of data collection in particular have increased over the years. To give an example: conducting one GGP wave of face-to-face interviews among 10000 respondents in a high-cost country like the Netherlands cost over € 1.5M. Despite such considerable costs, many participating institutions were able to raise funding for their national surveys in the past. However, the economic crisis has made it increasingly difficult to secure funding for new waves of the GGP. In addition, several countries that have shown serious interest in participating in the GGP have not been able to raise sufficient funds to turn this interest into actual participation. Although the success of national fundraising does not only depend on the costs of the infrastructure (but also, for instance, on its perceived importance), the cost element is critical. Looking ahead, the GGP aims to continue collecting data in the 19 participating countries every three years. It is also the intention to expand the programme to new countries. The goal is to ultimately establish the Generations and Gender survey in all 28 EU member states. To achieve this ambitious aim and to secure a sustainable future for the GGP, it is necessary to consider cost efficiency measures in data collection.

Introducing Web Surveys

Many efforts were made in the Design Study to evaluate the current design of the Generations and Gender Survey and to suggest changes that could make it more cost-efficient. The main change is the decision to move from face-to-face surveys to web-based surveys. This measure reduces non-response, attrition, and can be more effective in gaining insights into individuals' personal relationships and attitudes. It is also estimated that such a change will decrease the costs of data collection per country by about one third, a considerable reduction in the funds required to conduct the survey. This shift does however create challenges as well as opportunities and the GGP has invested and continues to invest in ways of tackling the problems brought about by web surveys, such as selection and mode effects which reduce the comparability between responses given over the web and face-to-face.

A Sustainable Infrastructure

Future waves of the GGP will also be completed and processed using a standardized, centralized, highly efficient data collection process. This system, standard within ESFRI Social Science projects, will enable participating countries to reduce data collection costs further, will improve the timeliness and quality of data releases, and prepare the infrastructure, upon which the GGP is based, for the future. There are many parts of the data collection process that could be centralized and therefore reduce costs for individual countries. These include questionnaire testing, harmonization of measures and production of accurate and comprehensive documentation. The GGP has made great strides in this area but there are still considerable returns to increased standardization, centralization and economies of scale. These efficiencies will reduce data collection costs for individual countries and thus increase the sustainability of the programme as a whole. These measures will also enable the GGP to meet the standards for a European Research Infrastructure with regards to accessibility, documentation and legal frameworks, and, hopefully, facilitate inclusion in the ESFRI Roadmap and constitution as an ERIC.

Conclusion

The GGP, through its longitudinal coverage of the whole life-course, occupies a central position as a research infrastructure. It is an essential tool to allow a better understanding of the increasingly complex life-course of individuals and family life, as well as their cross-national differences and similarities. The GGP is committed to providing data that fit Europe's research strategy as outlined in Horizon 2020. With abundant information on two of its key themes – health, demographic change and well-being, and inclusive, innovative and secure societies – and its wide coverage of European countries, the GGP is ideally suited to provide scientifically informed and policy-relevant answers to key societal questions. In FP6 and FP7, many social science projects – e.g. MAGGIE, MULTI-LINKS, REPRO, NEUJOBS – and ten ERC grants used or are using GGP data. With the release of a significant number of additional longitudinal datasets in the coming years and the realisation of the planned developments outlined above, it is expected that the GGP will be used even more in projects funded by Horizon 2020. Key steps have been made, and will continue to be made, to ensure that the GGP is a research infrastructure which meets the highest technical standards in order to answer some of the most pressing questions in the social sciences.

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