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Misfortune and Family
How negative events, family ties and lives are linked

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Abstract:
Despite a considerable number of persons experiencing negative life events such as serious psychological problems, financial difficulties, or an addiction to alcohol or drugs, scholarly attention on the life course has focused mostly on “normal” life events associated with the family life cycle (for instance, marriage and parenthood). The main aim of this dissertation was to advance our understanding of the former, negative events by showing their bi-directional links with current relationships with (extended) family. To unravel these links, this dissertation applies two widely used theoretical perspectives on family relationships and life events: the model of intergenerational solidarity and the life course framework. Employing data from two large-scale panel surveys on the strength and nature of family relationships in the Netherlands and US respectively, the validity and viability of conceptualizing family relationships along dimensions of solidarity and conflict was first shown. Moreover, it was demonstrated how these dimensions can be analyzed simultaneously in order to identify the most common relationship types among adult children and their parents. Five relationship types were identified in the data: two more positive, an obligatory, a conflictive, and a behaviorally ambivalent type in which high levels of support coincide with high levels of conflict. Analyses revealed that relationship change (modelled as transitions between types) was indeed related to events in the lives of both generations. More specifically, increased dependency of the older generation – as indicated by declining health and widowhood –, as well as changes in the employment career of the younger generation (including involuntary unemployment) advanced transitions in relationship types. Overall, these findings are in line with the life course principle of linked lives, which proposed that changes or events in one person’s life will affect the relationship with significant
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others, including family. Likewise, for the reverse causal relation it was shown that the likelihood to experience negative life events was related to the relationships one currently has with family.

Moreover, by applying more specific theories, several pathways of influence could be distinguished in the data. First, members of families which had more mutual contact and demonstrated greater family cohesion were less likely to experience serious psychological problems, financial difficulties, an addiction, or commit a crime. Similarly, the dissolution of unmarried cohabiting relationships was less likely if the partners were more integrated in each other’s families. Second, it was found that the experience of divorce within the extended family increased the likelihood with which couples dissolved their relationship, suggesting that norms on the acceptability of relationship dissolution are associated with patterns of behavior in the family. However, members of families in which deviant behavior is more strongly disapproved did not show a lower likelihood to exhibit financial difficulties, an addiction, or criminal behavior. Finally, the willingness of members of the extended family to provide support in times of need was found to be associated with a reduced likelihood to experience both serious psychological and behavioral problems, as well as with the likelihood that partners would end their relationship.