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Comment

Comment on “Why do women interact with their parents more often than men? The demonstration effect vs. the biological effect”



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ABSTRACT

This Comment takes issue with the inference that Taiwanese data refute the applicability of the demonstration effect in intergenerational transfers. The Comment points to proper and discriminating tests of the demonstration effect.

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The demonstration effect in intergenerational transfers (Cox and Stark, 1994; Stark, 1999; Cox and Stark, 2005) seeks to explain the care, companionship, and other forms of assistance and attention that adult children provide for their parents. This is achieved by expanding the domain of analysis of intergenerational interaction from two generations to three, focusing on the possibility that a child's conduct is conditioned by parental example, and that parents take advantage of their children's learning potential by providing attention and care for their own parents when children are present to observe and are impressionable.

Consider a family consisting of members of three generations: a child (K), a parent (P), and a grandparent (G). Each person lives for three periods, first as a K, then as a P, and finally as a G. P wants K to help in the next period when P becomes a G and K becomes a P. To demonstrate

to K the appropriate way to behave in the next period, P provides visible help to G when K is around to watch and be conditioned. It follows that aid from P to G depends positively on the presence of impressionable K.

One inference of the demonstration effect is that people who expect to gain later on in life from their children treating them in a desirable manner, and who attach importance to that, will have an incentive to instill the desired behavior in their children. Two consequences of this inference are, first, that in a society where the state generously provides care and attention in old age, the importance attached to children as providers of such services will be low, the reverse in a society where the state does not so provide. Second, women typically have longer life expectancy than men, and they marry men who are older than themselves. In western countries, these two differences sum up to approximately 7–10 years in late life when a woman will be without a spouse, having to rely on attention and care provided by her children, whereas a man in his late life will be able to obtain attention and care from his wife. These consequences are highlighted in Cox and Stark, 1994; Stark, 1999; and Cox and Stark, 2005.

Given this brief account, the empirical inquiry of Tao (2014), claiming to marshal evidence that rejects

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the applicability of the demonstration effect, does not withstand scrutiny. Tao claims that “If single females interact with their elderly parents more often than single males, then adult mothers with children interacting with their elderly parents more often than adult fathers ... cannot be explained by the demonstration effect” (p. 351). Not so. There can be a variety of reasons, for example biological, why females (daughters) interact with their parents more than males (sons), and it can well be that they so act regardless of whether they are childless or mothers. A proper test of the demonstration effect is whether, as compared to childless women, mothers interact more. That is, whether given the background factors, the incorporation of a demonstration effect intensifies acts or behavior aimed at inculcating future desirable conduct in children.

A discriminating test of the demonstration effect cannot be based on the frequency of visits of P to G, even if such visits occur when P have K; having K is a necessary, but not a sufficient condition for a test to be valid. As already intimated in the opening paragraph of this Comment, what is critical for the demonstration effect to be operative is that K are at an impressionable age. To sharpen the point, assume that children below the age of x cannot as yet be influenced, and that children above the age of $x + t$ cannot

anymore be influenced, where x and t are psychologically derived. Then, visits aimed at bearing fruit in terms of impressing K will be those occurring when K are at age bracket $(x, x + t)$. A test of the demonstration effect will thus be whether the intensity of visits to P correlates meaningfully with K's age bracket.

It is also quite obvious that all behaviors are culture specific; the demonstration effect idea was generated as a result of observing behavior in the US and may have little or no bearing in societies where strong social norms leave little room for behavior not aligned with those norms, and where individual discretion is limited.

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