

## SHIFTS AND VARIATIONS

An evolutionist perspective on changes in life in the Netherlands and Belgium, 1950-2000

The project's aim is to describe and explain changes in everyday life in the Netherlands and Belgium over the past half century. Two keywords capture these changes. On the one hand, variation increased in the sense that life courses and lifestyles became more multiform. On the other hand, there has been a shift in that ambitions and expectations have risen overall. Thus, our lifestyles *allow* us to do a lot more but also *require* us to do a lot more. Although many regard this trend as a sign of individualization, I perceive little scientific merit in such an encompassing concept. (1) Instead, I recommend a description and explanation based on the contemporary evolution theory.

### Principle

Obviously, major differences exist between natural processes and the history of mankind. We can accumulate experiences from previous generations as culture, while non-human forms of life rely on slow mutations of their genetic material. I still believe, however, that aside from these differences, interesting *analogies* exist between the histories of human and natural forms of life. Analyzing individual courses of life reveals such analogies. After all, every individual is responsible for charting his own course through life. The course depends both on external conditions and on internal motives. Social surroundings are a perpetual source of pressure in that they impose certain requirements on individuals. On the other hand, people consistently pursue personal objectives. They try to change their environment – if this proves impossible – to migrate to an environment more compatible with their objectives. The actual life course arises from a permanent interaction between actors and their surroundings. I therefore perceive this course as a process of choosing and being chosen. On the one hand, people select certain surroundings based on internal motives, while, conversely, each environment picks the most suitable individuals.

Over the course of people's lives the different environments are not always equally important. During the first six years, family life prevails. The direction that life takes depends largely on interactions with parents and other family members. Nonetheless, children cannot be moulded entirely. From early childhood they have individual attributes and motives that deeply influence their social surroundings in certain cases. The educational environment becomes important in the next stage. Children cope with the new requirements and will in turn develop a personal attitude toward school. From puberty, interactions with age-mates become more important. Adolescents pursue an individual course and temporarily move away from their original environments. In the subsequent stage of establishing relationships, choosing and being chosen becomes very significant. The same is true of the search for employment. Selection processes figure explicitly in two respects: on the one hand, employers impose requirements on their staff, while on the other hand the employees are selective by not accepting all jobs. Later, other environments become important. Care and social support

become more pronounced. (2) In this sense the course of life comprises stages involving constant coordination of internal motives and external conditions.

### Theoretical framework

Although interactions between individuals and their surroundings are the basis here, they are not the actual research object. In fact, I aim to use Stephen J. Gould's theoretical framework. (3) Gould observes that evolutionary processes always concern a *population as a whole* and thus imply variation by definition. The differentiation and selection processes taking place throughout nature lead existing species to emerge, disappear or change, depending on the local conditions. Gould offers two important corrections to current misperceptions. First, evolutionary development need not be gradual. Fairly sudden changes have occurred in the history of the species (characterised by the appearance of entirely new forms of life) as there have been times of stagnation (characterised by the absence of change). Second, the rise of new species does not signify a purposeful trend. While more complex forms of life do indeed emerge over time, they result from mechanisms that occur spontaneously and proceed in different directions. Moreover, species keep disintegrating and becoming less complex. Natural evolution is therefore not to be viewed as a form of progress.

### Actual changes

This context reveals why the everyday life in the Netherlands and Belgium is to be perceived from an evolutionist framework. Two major changes have occurred. First, life courses became more *varied*. In the early 1950s most people's lives followed a standard course. Very basically, people lived with their parents until they were around 25, married and had fairly large families. After their youngest children had left home, they had a few years to enjoy old age. This pattern has changed entirely. (4) Several new stages of life have been added, and the average life span has increased. Next, more options have become available in each stage. People can still get married but may also live together and choose whether they want to have children, whether they want a partner of the opposite sex or prefer to live in solitude or end their relationship after a period. In addition, far more choices are available in employment, education and leisure pursuits. There are even options concerning the end of life. As a consequence, we now have a wonderful variety of lifestyles that are broadly accepted, provided they do not inconvenience others excessively.

The second trend, which involves an unnoticed *shift* in our standards over the past half century, prevents this diversity from leading to chaos. I will consider a few important environments. First, we have come to expect better health and healthcare. In addition to living longer than we did a few decades ago, we rely more on physicians to cure illnesses or ailments. The same is occurring with respect to education and family life. Today's parents invest enormous amounts of money, attention, time and love in their children. Accordingly, they expect a lot from the children and from themselves. School curricula feature new subjects and are monitored more carefully for their effectiveness. Improvement in the average level of education has raised the pressure to succeed for all young people. The

labour market and corporate industry have become more demanding as well. Not only is higher education increasingly taken for granted, but expectations of social skills and personality have risen as well. (5) Finally, standards of personal interaction have changed. We take for granted that people treat each other as equal citizens, respect the lifestyles of others and do not judge each other on the basis of religion, descent, age or gender. Although these standards are not always met in practice, they figure prominently in the selection of actors in the different domains of life, especially in managing the increased variety.

### Working hypothesis

Where and when this dual process of differentiation and selection originated is an important question. Education has been crucial in my view. Many studies demonstrate education's decisive role in the course of life. It influences the number of children that people bring into the world and the timing. Education often determines people's earnings and their career opportunities, as well as the extent that people become involved in politics or help others. The higher level of education has also been a factor in the decline of the church and religious observance (secularization), while it has promoted equal rights for women (emancipation). Finally, greater school attendance has affected politics (democratization) and has been very palpable in corporate industry in recent decades (knowledge economy). In my view, therefore, education has been vital in modernizing life. The remarkable *economic growth* of the 1990s resulted from *thriving culture* in the preceding period. I have argued this position on previous occasions. In my thesis I submit that modernization of life during the nineteenth century conformed to the same principle. (6) The present study enables this hypothesis to be verified for post-war history.

### Sources and methods

In this study I intend to consult the vast databases of the CBS and the SCP. I will use the material to identify changes in the modal life course between 1950 and 2000. I am interested both in the increased variety and in the question as to which background variables (income, education, gender, religion, place of residence etc.) relate to the life courses concerned. Second, I intend to determine the directions in which the prevailing standards have shifted. To this end, I will devise several time sequences for important domains, such as 1. Demography and family life; 2. Labour market and corporate industry; 3. Public administration and legislation; 4. Politics and social affairs; 5. Education and production of meaning; 6. Culture and leisure activities. These time sequences are necessary in part to verify the hypothesis stated, which is that the economic or political liberalism of the 1980s and 1990s results from the cultural 'mutations' in the 1960s and 1970s. (7) In addition to statistical sources, I am considering depth interviews in which representatives of various generations relate their life stories. Comparing these stories with the more objectifying analysis based on time sequences should raise some interesting questions.

## International dimension

Conducting this study in the Netherlands and Belgium serves to highlight the effect of the socio-cultural surroundings. After all, the changes in life in both countries have followed the same general pattern. Changes such as longer life expectancies, more years of school attendance, a shorter working week, better social security, secularization and propagation of the entertainment culture have occurred throughout Western Europe. The Netherlands and Belgium have probably experienced a similar expansion of lifestyles. Nonetheless, *appreciation* of these changes *varies* and is influenced by longstanding socio-cultural contrasts. While the Dutch take a 'Scandinavian' view of variety, the Belgians prefer a 'Latin' approach. (8) The question is whether or not this contrast has been intensified. This need not mean that research on each country will require the same amount of time. The most practical approach would probably be to elaborate the issue for the Netherlands first and to use this foundation for a comparison with Belgium.

## Project execution

Most of the research will be carried out by the undersigned, who is qualified for this task in various respects. First, his thesis about modernization of life in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries has given him extensive experience with this type of research. Second, after obtaining his PhD, he completed two books on the problem at hand. One addresses the ups and downs of modern family life. The other covers changes in care and course of life. He is presently working on a book about aggression among youngsters. Third, he and Professor C.J.M. Schuyt conducted research on social changes in the village of Sassenheim between 1951 and 1993. The present research project will elaborate this study. In addition to a chief researcher, an individual might be appointed to assist in examining and processing the extensive files of the SCP and the CBS. The research will be carried out at the Amsterdam School for Social Science Research, although some external funding is probable.

## Product

In five years the research findings will be published as a book. Three preliminary studies were completed prior to the project (see above). The project's first three years shall be devoted to sections concerning a. the role of mass media, b. changes in corporate industry and c. processes in education. The conclusions of these sections will be published in international reviews. The last two years will be spent writing a broad study in English, which will differ from current literature in various respects. In addition to a thorough description of the changes in everyday life over the past half century, it will feature a systematic comparison of the Netherlands and Belgium during this period and will present this history from a new theoretical perspective.

G.J.M. van den Brink

## List of references

1. SCP, *Sociaal en Cultureel Rapport. 25 jaar sociale verandering*, Rijswijk 1998, pp. 3 ff.
2. G. van den Brink, *Een schaars goed. De betekenis van zorg in de hedendaagse levensloop*, Utrecht 1999, pp. 80 ff.
3. S. Gould, *The Panda's Thumb. More Reflections in Natural History* (Penguin, 1983); *Ibid.*, *Full House, the Spread of Excellence from Plato to Darwin*.
4. G. van den Brink, *Hoge eisen, ware liefde. De opkomst van een nieuw gezinsideaal in Nederland*, Utrecht 1997, pp. 84 ff.
5. R. Moelker, *Zou hij onze nieuwe werknemer kunnen zijn? Veranderingen in gevraagde kwalificaties als weerspiegeling van veranderingen in de betekenis van prestatie*, De Lier 1992, pp. 70 ff.
6. G. van den Brink, *De grote overgang. Een lokaal onderzoek naar de modernisering van het bestaan. Woensel 1670-1920*, Nijmegen 1996, pp. 501 ff.
7. G. van den Brink, 'De modernisering van Nederland en haar dubbelzinnige gevolgen', in: *Socialisme & Democratie*, Volume 56 (1999) No 12, pp. 548-557.
8. G. Hofstede, *Allemaal andersdenkenden. Omgaan met cultuurverschillen*, Amsterdam 1998, pp. 41, 111, 115, 145, 157, 178.