Intergenerational Contact in Europe: Altruism or Exchange?

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Contact between elderly parents and their adult children is recognized as one of the basic opportunity structures of intergenerational support. Intergenerational relationships have been addressed in several studies within the framework of the family solidarity model (Bengtson, 2001). Mainly focusing on Western societies, the literature has identified those traits of parents and children that mainly influence intergenerational contact (e.g. Bordone, 2009; Greenwell and Bengtson, 1997; Hank, 2007; Lawton *et al.*, 1994; Shelton and Grundy, 2000; Tomassini *et al.*, 2003; Wolf, 1994).

This paper examines cross-national differences in the frequency of parent-child contact in 15 European countries. In particular, we analyse the role of altruistic and exchange motives. Altruism assumes that intergenerational interactions are governed by concern about the well-being of the other; interactions are more frequent if needs are high. Exchange assumes that intergenerational interactions are governed by the prospect of future returns: interactions are more frequent if more rewards are anticipated.

Although intergenerational contact may not necessarily coincide with the quality of the parent-child tie, when contact is frequent, children and parents tend to be more aware of each other's needs. This, in turn increases other forms of intergenerational support. In fact, a positive correlation between contact frequency and perceived quality of the relationships has been shown (Kalmijn and Dykstra, 2006); but also, a strong positive association has been found between contact frequency and intergenerational support exchange (Silverstein et al., 1995; Van Gaalen & Dykstra, 2006). In contrast to the other forms of support, contact could be seen mainly as voluntary intergenerational solidarity (Heylen and Mortelmans, 2009; Tomassini *et al.*, 2004), which might be however motivated by either altruistic motives or exchange motives.

Intergenerational relationships are dyadic and therefore shaped by specific opportunities and needs of both the child and the parent. Socioeconomic and demographic characteristics and geographical differences are used as determinants in the majority of analyses. First, we introduce hypotheses that are likely to find support across all European countries. We expect that adult children require help when they have children of their own, and that grandchildren become the driving force to closeness (Malmberg and Pettersson, 2007). Moreover, we expect the presence of siblings to be crucial (Michielin and Mulder, 2007). Van Gaalen et al. (2008) show that intergenerational contact is less frequent if adult children have siblings who live closer to the parent than they themselves or if there are siblings who are emotionally closer to the parent.

Regarding parental needs, we expect the marital status of the parents to play a significant role. Separated and divorced parents generally have a lower frequency of contact with the children compared to married parents, and more strongly so for fathers (Kalmijn, 2007). Women are usually more engaged in kin-keeper roles, as both mothers and daughters (Gerstel and Gallagher, 1993). Empirical results consistently show a rank order in the closeness of the relationships from mother-daughter to father-son (Kaufman and Uhlenberg, 1998; Nauck, 2009; Rossi, 1993).

Second, we argue that the frequency of parent-child contact differs not only between individuals and families, but also according to the specific contextual conditions under which it takes place (Lowenstein and Ogg, 2003). Though it has been suggested that countries which have gone the furthest in the development of post-nuclear family structures are a model for the other countries in terms of intergenerational relationships (Murphy, 2004), studies consistently show that the associational solidarity between elderly parents and adult children remains significantly different within Europe (for a wider review, see also Hank, 2007; Tomassini *et al.*, 2004).

The gap between Northern and Southern European countries has particularly attracted the attention of researchers. Comparative analyses emphasise the importance of institutional arrangements. Most attention has been given to the way welfare systems are able to provide care for elderly people (e.g. Brandt, Haberkern, and Szydlik, 2009; Broese van Groenou et al., 2006). Because of the focus on welfare production, most cross-national comparative research on intergenerational relations taking into account the social context in later life has focused on helping and care rather than on emotional cohesion between generations.

Until recently, research rarely included East European countries (Dykstra, 2011), where coresidence of generations is widespread (Heylen & Mortelmans, 2009). Generational economics (Therborn, 2004), an interaction of generational interdependence and economic resources, are behind coresidence. Insufficient independent income precludes young adults and the elderly to maintain their own households. General economic malaise restricts this more widely, but specific housing markets may keep young people in their parental home, and the absence of affordable public residential and home care may necessitate intergenerational coresidence for older adults in need of assistance. Partly because of the unavailability of data, there is very limited research concerning parent-child relationships in Eastern European societies, where the family maintained a central role in people´s lives, acting as a buffer and protecting from the intrusiveness of external forces (Robila, 2004; Tóth, 2004). As Ahmed and Emigh (2005) highlight, multigenerational households are common in Eastern Europe: socio-economic difficulties result in many young couples, whether married or cohabiting, living for a period of time in the household of one of their parents at the beginning of their union (Pamporov, 2008). One of the main purposes of the family under socialism was to ensure children's future. On the other hand, children were expected to return the care to their parents when they were old, mainly because care facilities did not exist in sufficient quantity and quality. Currently, assistance is transferred both ways and children are still the most important source of support for the aged in Eastern societies (De Jong Gierveld et al., forthcoming). In Poland, for example, at least three-fourths of the elderly receive some form of children's help and even more are convinced that they will receive the help from a daughter or son if they will ask for it (Synak, 1990).

The analysis of parent-child relationships is particularly complicated and interesting at the same time because the family structure differs from country to country and creates a diversity of intergenerational relationship types (Dykstra and Fokkema, 2011). This study compares a larger

set of European countries, including four macro-regions (i.e. Northern, Western, Southern and Eastern European countries), filling in a gap in the literature about comparative studies on intergenerational solidarity. A theoretical and empirical discussion on similarities and differences between Western and Eastern European societies enriches the research on intergenerational relationships in ageing contexts.

Data and Method

Using data from the Survey of Health, Ageing and Retirement in Europe (SHARE), we consider the first wave for those countries who contribute to the SHARE baseline study in 2004 (i.e. Austria, Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Greece, Israel, Italy, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, and the Netherlands) and data from the second wave for those countries who joined the second data collection of SHARE, in 2006 (i.e. Czech Republic, Ireland, and Poland). Additionally, we include the so-called refresher sample introduced in the second wave. The sample used counts 20,357 parent-child dyads, where the child is randomly chosen among the offspring of the respondent. The sample is reduced to 16,005 dyads once parents living in the same household as the selected child are excluded.

The dependent variable is the frequency of contact between the interviewed parent and the randomly selected child. SHARE asks "During the past twelve months, how often did you have contact with {child name}, either personally, by phone or mail?" The answers are "Daily; Several times a week; About once a week; About every two weeks; About once a month; Less than once a month; Never". Indicators of altruistic motives are widowhood and poor health of the parent, and divorce, widowhood, and parenthood of the adult child. The working status of the child is also included among altruistic motives (distinguishing between student, employed, not working). Indicators of exchange motives are the likelihood of leaving an inheritance, parental divorce, and living nearby. We additionally consider whether the child has at least one sibling living within 5km distance from the parent. Gender, gender of the child, education and education of the child are used as controls in the multivariate analyses.

We make use of ordinal logistic models. Two sets of analyses are carried out, one including coresidential ties, and one excluding intergenerational coresidence. A more frequent intergenerational cohabitation in Eastern and Southern Europe than in North-Western countries often reflects an unfavourable housing and labour market situation (Aassve, Billari, and Ongaro, 2001; Barbagli *et al.*, 2003; Synak, 1990).

Results

The results of this study suggest that frequency of contact is more strongly governed by altruistic motives in Northern and Western Europe; while it derives mainly from exchange motives in Southern and Eastern Europe.

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