

## **Family structure, proximity and contact**

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Current societal dynamics are putting family relations, especially those along the generational lineage, squarely on the political and scientific agenda (cf. Kohli, 2004; Kohli & Künemund, 2005). Contemporary aging societies are age-graded and to a large extent age-segregated societies. Their institutions tend to be age-homogeneous (Uhlenberg & Riley, 2000). Exchange and support among generations is critical for maintaining age integration. In this respect the family plays a special role – it is the prototypical institution of age-heterogeneity. The family links lives far beyond the co-residing nuclear unit, most prominently along the generational lineage. Moreover, the demographics of aging societies – especially the increasing longevity and proportions of elderly people – address new demands to the family and its functions, e.g., in terms of support and care for the elderly. For societal welfare and welfare policy it becomes vital to assess the current state of the family and its likely evolution.

### **Common themes and national differences**

Families in Europe today present many features common to all countries as well as massive differences among them. As to commonalities, we expect to find a weakening of marriage with increasing age but stability of intergenerational bonds. As to differences, we expect to find patterns of “weak” and “strong” family regimes.

Research on these themes is sometimes like fighting against windmills: raising empirical arguments against myths that seem to remain untouched by them. It is widely assumed that the modern welfare state has undermined family solidarity and the family itself. Increasing childlessness and fewer births, decreasing marriage and increasing divorce rates, increasing numbers of singles and the decrease of multigenerational co-residence – to name just a few widely known facts – may indeed indicate a weakening of the family and its functions. But despite the high intuitive plausibility of such interpretations in which large parts of the social sciences meet with common sense, it may turn out that the family has in fact changed but not diminished its role (cf. Künemund & Rein, 1999).

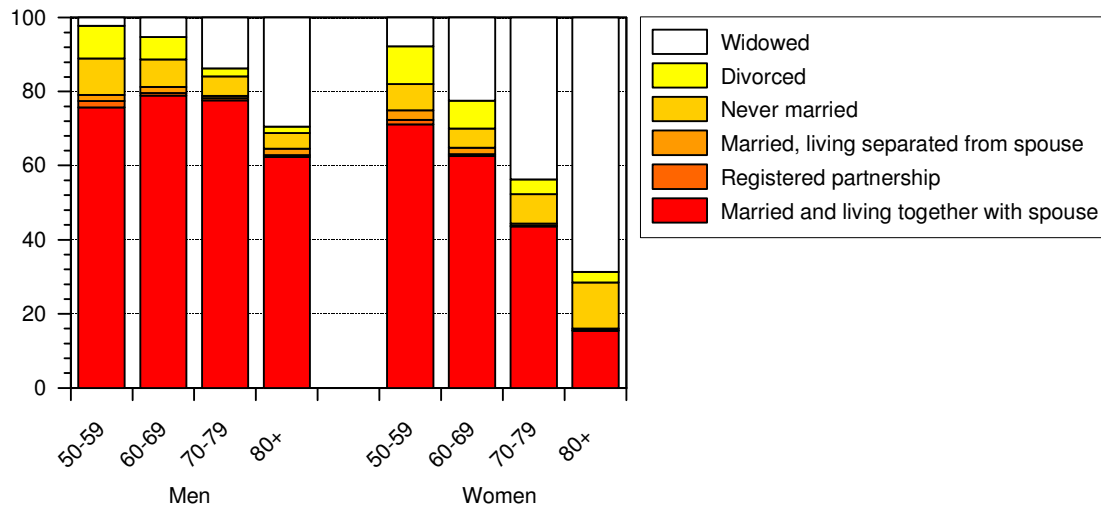
Speculation about the future of the family has been a regular feature of modernization, mostly with the assumption of a general decline of family bonds. This restrictive view was first transcended by research on the emotional and support relations between adult family generations. But it is only during the last decade that we have discovered again the full extent of the family as a kinship and especially a generational system beyond the nuclear household (Bengtson, 2001) which ranges across several different types of “solidarity”: spatial and emotional closeness, frequent contact, personal and instrumental support as well as massive flows of money and goods (cf. chapters 4.2 and 4.3). SHARE provides the first possibility to chart the family generations on a European level.

### **The ambivalence of marriage**

We first examine to what extent elderly Europeans are living together in bonds of marriage. In recent decades, the institution of marriage has been weakened by diminishing rates of ever getting married and increasing rates of divorce. Our findings show that the current elderly have not yet been strongly touched by this evolution (Figure 1 and Table 1). Among the 50-59 year olds 76 percent of the men and 71 percent of the women live in a married couple. There is a rise of divorce in the

younger cohorts but with ten percent of the 50-59 year olds currently divorced it is still far below the levels of those now in their 30's or 40's. Some of them may remarry in the future, so that the proportion of, e.g., divorced 60-69-year olds ten years from now cannot be predicted solely on the basis of the evolution of divorce rates. There is also a rising proportion of never-married men, while among women the opposite patterns holds, with the oldest group having the largest proportion of never-married (12 percent). – mainly due to the specific historical constellation of WWII and its aftermath.

Figure 1: Marital status (percentages by age and gender)



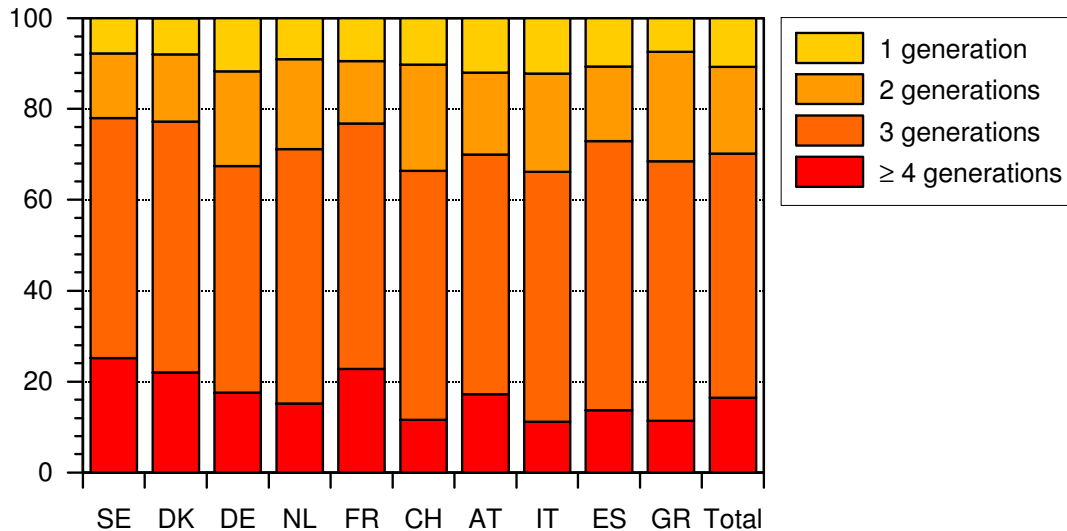
But the most drastic pattern is that associated with the death of the marriage partner. The higher longevity of women – for life expectancy at birth it is currently about 7 years – and the fact that men in couples are on average about 3-4 years older than their wives translate into highly divergent trajectories for the two sexes as they grow older. The proportion of widowed men increases from 2 percent (50-59) to 30 percent (80 and older), that of widowed women from 8 to 69 percent. As a result, 63 percent of men but only 16 percent of women over 80 still live with a (married or registered) spouse. In some countries this loss of the marital bond is even more marked; among the women over 80 in Greece almost nine tenths are widowed, and only one tenth still live in marriage.

### The power of generations

The family nucleus thus loses its impact with increasing age, especially among women. This is not the case, however, for the generational structure (Figure 2 and Table 2). Even after several decades of low fertility most European elderly still have a family that spans several generations. Only 11 percent have no other generation alive. The proportion rises somewhat in the older groups, but is below 15 percent except for the women above 80 where – due to the specific burdens mentioned above – it rises to 25 percent. The most frequent constellation – between 50 percent in Germany and 59 percent in Spain – is that of three generations. Four-generation families have a share of 16 percent, while five-generation families remain at a fraction of a percent. Even

among the youngest group, the mean number of living children in all countries remains above or close to 2; Germany has the lowest number with 1.68 (Table 3). The ‘second demographic transition’ to low fertility in Europe thus has not yet left its mark on parenthood among our cohorts. It does show in grandparenthood, with very low numbers among the youngest age group in some countries such as Greece, Spain, and Italy, even though it is unclear how many of the ‘missing’ grandchildren will still be born.

Figure 2: Generational constellations (percentages by country)



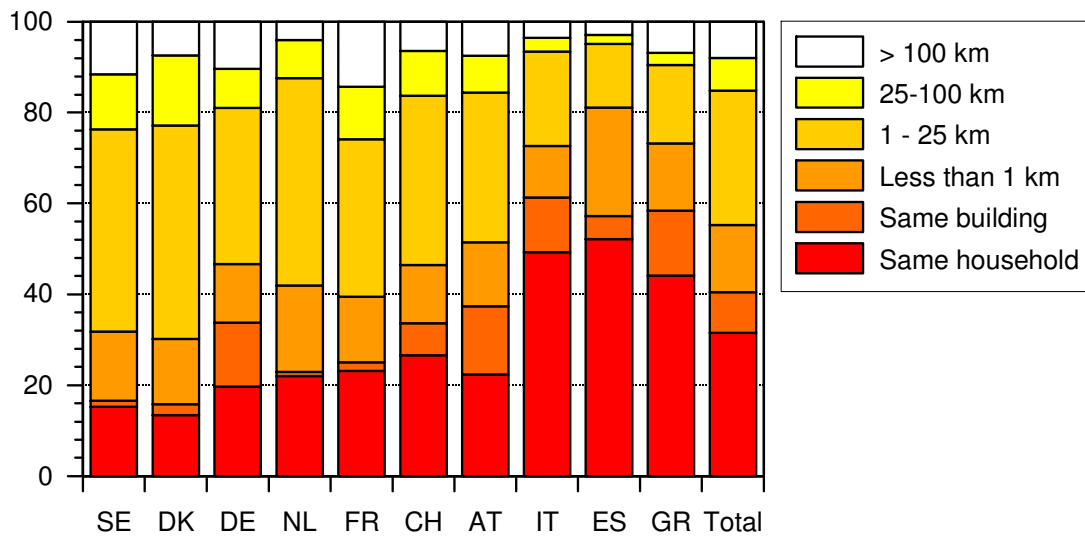
How does this translate into actual exchange and support? The first question here is about co-residence with and geographical proximity to these other generations. This is the one piece of evidence that seems to support the ‘modernization’ claim: In all Western societies, co-residence among adult family generations has decreased massively. Today, among the Europeans above 70 who have at least one living child, only 15 percent live together with a child in the same household (Table 4). But by extending the boundaries of ‘togetherness’ the situation turns out to be very different. If one includes parents and children living not only in the same household but also in the same house, the proportion rises from 15 to 29 percent, and by including the neighborhood less than 1 km away, to 49 percent. 84 percent have a child living not farther away than 25 km. The preference now seems to be for ‘intimacy at a (small) distance’ – small enough so that relations of exchange and support may function easily across the boundaries of the separate households (cf. Kohli et al., 2000). Thus, even the living arrangements are not very good evidence for the claim of a dissociation between parents and adult children. A similar result applies to the frequency of contact (Table 5).

### Weak and strong family countries

In these dimensions, however, it is the variation among countries that comes into focus. At the European level, there are considerable differences between Scandinavia, Central and Western Continental countries, and those of the Mediterranean. The latter

are often grouped together as ‘strong family countries’, and contrasted with the ‘weak family countries’ of the center and north of Europe and of North America (Reher, 1998). The strength or weakness refers to cultural patterns of family loyalties, allegiances, and authority but also to demographic patterns of co-residence with adult children and older family members and to organizing support for the latter. The ‘strong family countries’ have had high fertility in the past but today, paradoxically, are those with the lowest fertility (Kohler et al., 2002) – a state of affairs that is directly linked to the strength of their family tradition. While they have evolved, in conjunction with the other advanced countries, towards higher gender equity in education and the labor market, gender equity in the family and in public provisions for the family remains low. The dominant model, both culturally and in terms of welfare state incentives, is still that of the male breadwinner. The ensuing cultural lag in gender equity between the ‘individual-centered’ and the ‘family-centered’ worlds increasingly turns women away from motherhood (McDonald, 2000).

Figure 3: Proximity to nearest living child (percentages by country)



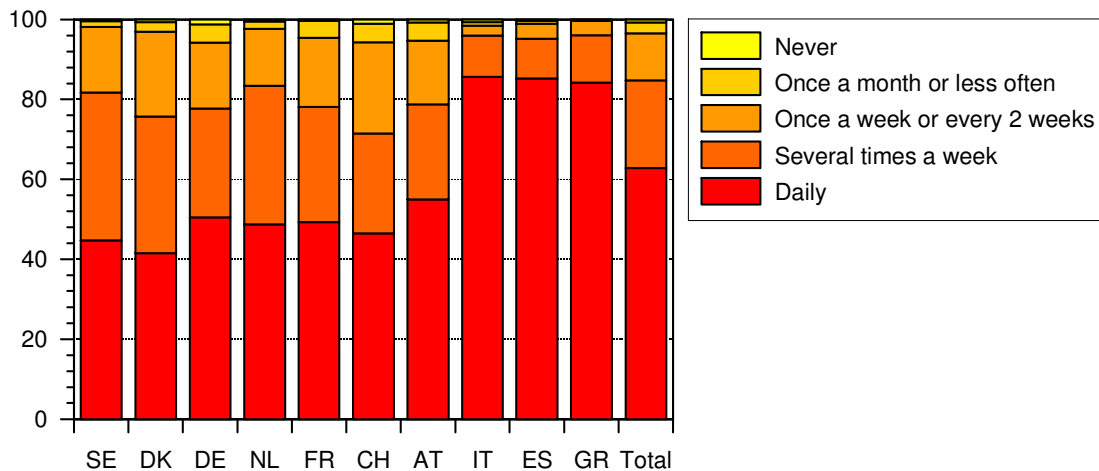
As mentioned above, these trends have mostly not yet directly affected the SHARE cohorts. For them – and therefore also for the elderly in the near future – the pattern remains one of comparatively high marriage rates and low rates of childlessness. But they are affected in an indirect way, through the decreasing prevalence of marriage and childbearing among their children.

Our data demonstrate that there is not only a ‘weak’-‘strong’ dichotomy but a North-South gradient, with the Scandinavian countries generally having the least traditional family structure, the Mediterranean countries (Spain and Italy more so than Greece) the most traditional one, and the other continental countries lying somewhere in-between. This already shows for the variation in marital status, e.g., divorce (Table 1). Denmark and Sweden are at the top with 13 and 12 percent currently divorced, followed by Germany, Austria, France and Switzerland with 9 percent, the Netherlands with 6 percent, Greece with 4 percent, and Italy and Spain with 2 percent. Massive differences occur with respect to co-residence (Figure 3 and Table 4). The Mediterranean countries are characterized by very late (and increasing) ages of leaving the parental home among adult children. This is often interpreted solely as an

effect of opportunity structures (employment and housing markets), but the variation among countries may also be explained by a cultural tendency towards closer intergenerational ties. While we are not able at this point to differentiate between those who have never left the parental home and those who have moved back later or have had their parents moving closer (cf. Attias-Donfut & Renaut, 1994), the overall proportions are striking. In Denmark and Sweden, 13 and 15 percent of our respondents who have at least one living child live with a child in the same household, in the ‘center’ countries this amounts to between 20 and 27 percent, but in Italy and Spain to 49 and 52 percent. Moving beyond the boundaries of the household yields a similar picture. Among the 50-59 year old Mediterraneans, more than three quarters still have a child living at home with them. Among the oldest age group, the proportions are smaller but the differences between countries even larger: only 1 percent of the oldest Swedes and 4 percent of Danes live with a child, compared to 23 percent of Italians and 34 percent of Spaniards.

As in all such comparisons, differences should of course not be examined at the level of nation states only; there are important regional differences as well. In Italy and Spain, differences between north and south in terms of variables such as co-residence may be equally large as between countries, to the point where, e.g., Northern Italy demographically may have more in common with other Western European countries than with the *mezzogiorno*. Another case in point are differences between native and migrant populations. In Germany, the mean number of grandchildren for our respondents is 2.05 among those who on November 1, 1989, lived in West Germany, 2.96 among those who lived in the GDR, and 3.78 among those who lived abroad and have migrated to Germany since then.

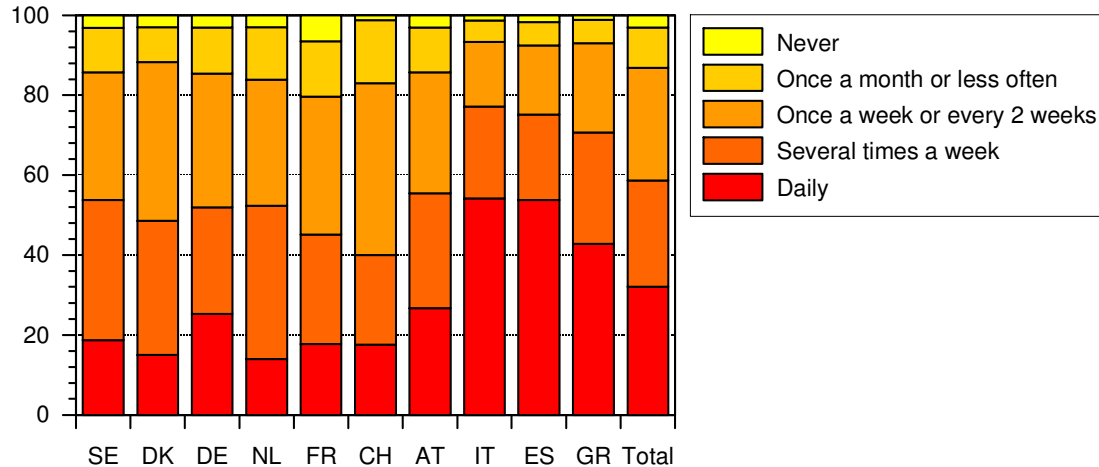
Figure 4: Frequency of contact to most contacted child (percentages by country)



Similar results as for proximity obtain for frequency of contact with children and parents. As a whole, they show that the adult generations in the family, even in countries with comparatively weaker family traditions and larger geographical distance, remain closely linked. Contact to the most contacted child (Figure 4 and Table 5) is daily for 42 and 45 percent in Denmark and Sweden, respectively, and for between 47 and 55 percent in the central countries; the Mediterranean countries stand out with between 84 and 86 percent. In all countries 70 percent or more have contact at least several times a week; in the Mediterranean countries, it is 95 percent or more.

There are those who have no contact at all to their living child or children but in no country do they make up more than one percent. In the older age groups contact is less frequent, but even among those over 80 at least three fifths (in Switzerland), and more than nine tenths (in the Mediterranean countries) are in contact with a child daily or several times a week.

Figure 5: Frequency of contact to most contacted parent (percentages by country)



Contact with parents (Figure 5) is somewhat less frequent, partly because there are often several children of which only one lives close to their parents (cf. Konrad et al., 2002) and remains in close contact. There may also be some tendency to overreport contact with children and/or underreport contact with parents – a response pattern associated with the often-observed difference in the ‘developmental stake’ of parents and children (Giarrusso et al., 1995). It should be noted that the numbers here are restricted to own parents – parents-in-law are included only where they live in the same household. As to differences between countries, the Mediterranean countries again stand out, while there is no noticeable gap between Scandinavia and the Continent. Switzerland has the lowest proportion of contact with parents at least several times a week – corresponding to the fact that parents here most often live farther away as a result of international migration.

### What is to be concluded?

In conclusion, we emphasize four points:

- For present elderly Europeans the family has remained a strong provider of institutional and everyday integration. The historical decline of marriage has not yet reached them directly.
- The marriage bond weakens however with increasing age, and dramatically so for women.
- On the other hand, the multi-generational structure of the family remains stable. Even though co-residence of the elderly with their adult children has decreased, geographical proximity – and thus the potential for everyday

- support – is high. There are moreover high rates of frequent contact with each other.
- While this is true for Western Europe as a whole, there are important differences among the ‘strong family countries’ in the South and the ‘weak family countries’ in the North. The North-South gradient is especially noticeable with respect to rates of co-residence and frequency of contact among adult family generations.

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