Ties that Bind: Families across Time and Space

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The thirty-first Uhlenbeck Lecture was held in Wassenaar on 27 September 2013

NIAS, Wassenaar, 2013/6

ISBN
ISSN 921-4372; 31

NIAS is an Institute of the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences (KNAW)

KONINKLIJKE NEDERLANDSE
AKADEMIE VAN WETENSCHAPPEN

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Families 'bind' people in several ways. They link older and younger generations and facilitate social control. In that view, at the macro level, families are seen to be part of the glue that holds society together. On a micro level, families impose high degrees of dependence on people's lives. They create opportunities – by providing access to different kinds of resources, for example – but they also constrain daily activities through such obligations as caring for your next of kin.

Most family scholarship focuses on two generations of family members: parents and young children. Departing from this practice, I enlarge the scope of my research to cover family relationships over entire life spans and to multigenerational connections. This allows me to deal better with an important reality that is too often ignored. Because we live longer and longer, more people with children remain children themselves, even grandchildren, to their parents and grandparents (Herlofson & Hagestad, 2011). The broader approach that I take bridges separate bodies of literature that have remained largely disconnected, and poses promising research questions that so far have been overlooked.

One source for my thinking and material is a school of research that took shape in the 1960s and that deals with the lives of individuals in larger contexts. Known

as life course theory, this field emphasises the need to acknowledge that people's lives are linked to those of others around them (Elder, 1994; Hagestad, 2003). To some life course theorists, the main interaction undergone by an individual is that with immediate family. They see close relatives as 'fellow life travellers', people with whom individuals pass through life as if in convoy (Antonucci & Akiyama, 1987). They are particularly impressed by the considerable measure of learning that occurs in families and the ways in which family members function as significant others from whom cues are taken and whose reactions are integral to the decisions people make. These colleagues see close relatives as resources to whom a person can turn during times of need, but who themselves can be recipients of help and care. Other life course scholars, particularly in Europe, look further afield, concentrating on the effect on people's lives of the places where they live (Mayer, 2004; 2009). They examine the political structures, educational systems, labour market arrangements, housing markets, laws, entitlements and social services in the country of residence as factors that guide the steps one takes in life.

In today's Uhlenbeck Lecture I connect these two theoretical strands: the notions of 'linked lives' and 'lives in context'. More specifically, I address the 'dialectical interaction' (Hendricks, 2012, p. 226) between the main levels of life in society: individual behaviour and choices, family practices and regional and national contexts. A key instrument in dealing with matters of such complexity is the concept of *generational interdependence*, the kind of interdependence that necessarily comes into being when family members in succeeding generations are emotionally, financially, practically, and morally reliant on and responsible for each other. Situated between the micro level of the individual and the macro, social environment, the family is seen in this regard as inhabiting a meso or intermediate context. The study of generational interdependence looks for the interplay in the life of the individual between family ties and the politics, economics and culture of the surroundings.

Adopting a multigenerational view of family ties, across life phases, I first discuss why it is scientifically interesting to study families. Next, acknowledging that the shared lives of parents and offspring are longer today than ever before, I illustrate the usefulness of adopting a multigenerational view of family ties. Finally, I reveal some of the ways in which policy, economic and cultural contexts structure generational interdependence in families, paying specific attention to possible implications for theoretical models of intergenerational interactions.

Why study families?

Studying families provides insight into the key questions that have occupied sociologists since the start of their inquiries. What are the forces that hold society together? What are the causes of social change? What are the roots of inequality? Let me show how a focus on families helps answer these broad sociological questions.

First, research on family relationships is informative about the mechanisms underlying *social cohesion*. The French sociologist Emile Durkheim (1858-1917) provided classic descriptions of how marriage and parenthood provide society with connectedness and shield it against anomie (Durkheim, 1896/1951). Governments always have a strong stake in the effective functioning of families, and do what they can to define and regulate what they consider to be acceptable family behaviour (Goode, 2003; Keck, Hessel, & Saraceno, 2009). Another part of this research is based on the premise that kin relationships serve as bridges between social groups. For example, families are one of the few contexts in which people of different ages continually meet and interact (Hagestad & Uhlenberg, 2005). Analyses of marriage patterns reveal whether people marry within their social circle or outside it (Ultee & Luijkx, 1990). Yet another strand of research focuses on social control in kin relationships. The stronger the interdependence the more likely that the behaviour of a fellow family member will be called into question. With the increasingly egalitarian relationships in our society, control is exercised not only by the old on the young, but also the other way around (Glass, Bengtson, & Dunham, 1986; Roest, 2009).

Second, the field of family research provides insight into processes of what sociologists call *modernity*, a concept that covers social changes of many kinds. Family research benefits this branch of scholarship by examining the shifts in family relationships that accompany changes in economic conditions, labour market arrangements, government provisions, laws and cultural climate. A key question concerns the direction of influence. Do economic and social circumstances facilitate particular family patterns or are they derived from them? Family sociologists writing in the 1940s argued that a nuclear family system, with its self-contained units, was best suited to meet the mobility requirements of industrialised societies (e.g., Parsons, 1943). The extended family, with its several generations of adults sharing a household – or at least living at a short distance from each other – best fit agrarian societies, it was felt, where people own their

productive capital and pass it on to their offspring. Recently, migration scholars have attributed the rise in transnational families (where members live across national borders) to the growing wage gap between poor and rich countries and the increased demand for care services in developed countries (Elrick & Lewandowska, 2008; Zentgraf & Chinchilla, 2012).

A third field of research to which the study of families can offer a substantial contribution deals with the sources of *social inequality*. Work on intergenerational transmission, for example, reveals the ways in which advantages and disadvantages are passed on from generation to generation (Duncan, 1979; Liefbroer & Dykstra, 2007). The resources that are conveyed are not only material, in the form of gifts, financial support and bequests, but also nonmaterial qualities such as cultural and social capital, norms and values, educational and professional opportunities, and divorce risks. Another form of inequality is that between partnered and single individuals. Those who are involved in stable partnerships tend to be healthier, wealthier, happier and less lonely (De Jong Gierveld, Van Tilburg, & Dykstra, 2006; Waite & Gallagher, 2000). Among the factors that may account for this phenomenon are the support a partner provides, the esteem accorded to coupledom, and the greater regularity of daily activities associated with sharing a household (e.g., Berkman, Glass, Brisette, & Seeman, 2000). Selection also plays a role: people with health problems or fewer resources have a lower probability of entering partnerships, remaining attached, or repartnering (Simon, 2002; Soons & Kalmijn, 2009).

Adopting a multigenerational view of family ties

To describe family networks, one cannot rely on standard demographic measures such as fertility rates, life expectancy, and household composition. Registry data on fertility are collected for women only; information on men is lacking. Measures limited to the household unit disregard non-coresident kin. Another complicating factor in the study of the generational structure of families is that certain developments may play out against one another. A good example is provided by the opposing effects of increasing longevity on the one hand and postponed childbearing on the other. An extended life span increases the likelihood that three, four or even five generations may be alive at the same time, while delayed childbearing, which augments the age gap between generations, reduces the likelihood that multiple generations will be alive at the same time. An inventory of

intergenerational ties requires survey data, such as those of the Netherlands Kinship Panel Study (Dykstra et al., 2006).

Table 1 provides a simple description of generational family ties. What proportion of the Dutch adult population have 'upward' and 'downward' family links? As the table shows, it is very uncommon for Dutch people under the age of 40 to have no surviving parents; fewer than one percent of those aged 18 to 40 do not have a living father or mother. Almost a third of Dutch adults in their thirties have living grandparents, but 30-year-olds do not generally come to mind when one thinks of grandchildren. Neither do we tend to think of people in their sixties as children. Nevertheless, more than a quarter of Dutch 60 to 70-year-olds have surviving parents.

Table 1. Dutch adults by age and the existence of parents, grandparents, children and grandchildren

	18-29	30-39	40-49	50-59	60-69	70-79
	%	%	%	%	%	%
≥ one parent	99.3	98.9	93.3	70.4	26.1	3.4
≥ one grandparent	74.7	31.3	6.0	0.1	0.1	0.0
≥ one child	12.7	63.3	80.7	84.0	90.3	85.4
≥ one grandchild	0.0	0.2	3.0	28.6	70.3	78.5

There is abundant literature underscoring the importance of intergenerational family relationships in shaping the life chances of the young, the middle-aged and the old. Unhappily for our purposes, these contributions are focused rather sharply. 'Parenting' tends to be about young families, 'intergenerational transmission' typically focuses on early and middle adulthood, whereas 'informal care' is about adult children and their ageing parents. Studies on 'grandparenting' are exceptional in the sense that multiple generations of family members are usually considered simultaneously: grandchildren, the middle generation and grandparents – even great-grandparents. The partitioning of the family literature by life phase has engendered overspecialisation in academic work. The research community has been slow in acknowledging that parenting does not stop when children have grown up (but see Levitzki, 2009), that intergenerational transmission is a two-way process (but see Roest, 2009), that intergenerational

transmission might involve multiple generations (but see Chan & Boliver, 2013), and that there are similarities in caring for the young and for the old (but see Leitner, 2003).

A consideration of three or more family generations reveals crucial insights that cannot be gained by focusing on a single or even two family generations. In MULTILINKS[1], a European research programme funded through the Seventh Framework of the European Commission, we demonstrated that a focus on both the young and the old illuminates previously neglected issues (Dykstra & Komter, 2012). For example, studies on labour force exit can benefit from looking at the retirement decision in a multigenerational perspective rather than solely focusing on the retiring generation. Van Bavel and De Winter (2013) examined whether a combination of grandchild care and early retirement arrangements might encourage older workers to leave the labour force before the official retirement age. Their analyses revealed that grandparenthood speeds up retirement, particularly for older women. This is a compelling finding in the present environment, as governments strive to increase labour force participation in an ageing Europe. Whereas taking care of grandchildren enables the middle generation to be gainfully employed, it suppresses the economic activity of the older generation. Seen in this light, grandparenting is basically an expensive form of childcare.

The 'discovery' of grandparents (Segalen, 2010) by fertility researchers is another example of how new insights have been gained from the simultaneous consideration of the young and the old in families. A number of studies have shown that the decision to have children is taken more easily when support from grandparents is available. To get a grasp on this phenomenon, one has to have reliable longitudinal datasets, which track the same type of information on the same respondents at multiple points in time. Using Dutch data on three generations, Kaptijn and colleagues (2010) demonstrated that sons and daughters who received frequent childcare support from their parents were more likely to have a second or third child than offspring who received no such support. (For findings from Germany, see Hank & Kreyenfeld, 2003.) A study using longitudinal

[1] The full title of the programme is: 'How demographic changes shape intergenerational solidarity, well-being, and social integration: A multilinks framework.' For an overview of the findings, see Dykstra 2012 or visit http://www.multilinks-project.eu/.

data from eleven European countries showed that the positive effect of grandparental help on childbearing decisions was much greater in Mediterranean countries than in Western and Northern Europe, where public childcare provisions are more generous (Aassve, Meroni, & Pronzato, 2011).[2] This brings us to the consideration of a related but distinct issue: the macro-level structuring of generational interdependence.

Recognising macro-level structuring of generational interdependence

Influence of policy arrangements

Intergenerational ties constitute a terrain par excellence where private and public care efforts meet, overlap, compete and clash with each other. The lay of the land is however quite different from country to country. While in all developed societies the caring and financial responsibility for young and old family members are shared between families and the state (Kohli, Albertini, & Künemund, 2010), countries differ significantly in their understanding of what constitutes 'proper' intergenerational family relations (Viazzo, 2010). In one country legal and policy arrangements might reinforce generational interdependencies and in another lighten them. Laws define the rights and duties of younger and older family members towards each other, while policies (or their absence) reward or discourage particular family practices (Grandits, 2010; Leira, 2002; Saraceno, 2010).

The research community has only started to scratch the surface of how macro-level forces shape family behaviour in Western, Northern, Eastern and Southern Europe. Their efforts are fortunately aided by the increasing availability of data sets such as the Generations and Gender Programme (which was modeled on the Netherlands Kinship Panel Study).[3]

MULTILINKS research provides an example of the ways in which policy arrangements structure intergenerational family relationships. In figure 1

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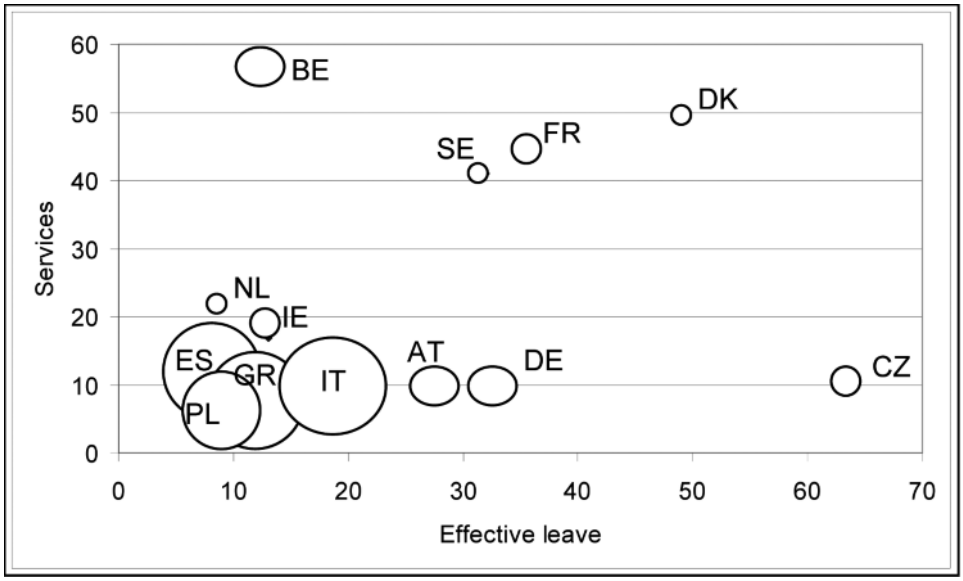
[2] At the micro level there is a positive association between grandparental help and childbearing decisions. At the macro level, however, the association is negative. Fertility rates are highest in countries with the most generous public childcare facilities (Castles, 2003; MacDonald, 2006). These are also the countries where grandparents are least likely to provide daily childcare (Herlofson & Hagestad, 2012).

[3] See http://www.ggp-i.org for more information on the GGP.

Figure 1. Predicted probability of caring for the child of a working daughter by level of effective leave and services



(adopted from Bordone, Arpino, & Aassve, 2012), the size and position of the circles shows, for a number of European countries, the likelihood that grandparents provide childcare on a daily basis. The larger the circle, the greater the likelihood that grandparents provide care. This may seem to be dependent mainly on personal inclinations and cultural habits, but as it emerges, the size of the circle – they are particularly large for Italy, Greece, Spain and Poland – is strongly linked to the availability of public arrangements.[4] This is indicated by the position of the circle, which is determined by the availability of childcare services and the generosity of parental leave. Belgium scores highest in terms of childcare services, the Czech Republic when it comes to parental leave, and Denmark has high levels in both types of arrangements. The key conclusion is that we find the

[4] The policy measures are from the MULTILINKS policy indicators database (Keck, Hessel, & Saraceno, 2009). Childcare services are the number of places in publicly subsidised facilities as a share of the number of children under the age of three. Effective leave is the duration of paid parental leave multiplied by the level of financial compensation for the leave.

largest circles where the services and leaves are least generous. Grandparents step in when a lack of public facilities keeps parents from combining paid work and parenting.[5]

One of the aims of MULTILINKS was to achieve a better understanding of the family/state division of responsibility for the old and the young. For this purpose, three graded patterns in legal and policy frameworks were distinguished (Saraceno & Keck, 2010), building on the writings of Gøsta Esping-Andersen (1999), Walter Korpi (2000) and Sigrid Leitner (2003). These patterns help us to measure the effect of country-specific institutional frameworks on the behaviour of individuals within the family. Which polities push one in the direction of reliance on family members and which support individual autonomy?[6] The first pattern, *familialism by default*, pertains to countries where there are few or no public alternatives to family care and financial support. The second is *supported familialism*, where the state supports families in meeting their financial and caring responsibilities, usually in the form of leaves and payments. In the third form, *defamilialisation*, support needs are partly supplied by public provision, such as services or basic income. An important issue is the form of support. There can be big differences in the effects of outright payment, paid or unpaid leave, or care services. This is most visible, to cite the main example, when public support is offered in money rather than in kind. The recipient then can choose between using the payment to buy services or to keep it for the family budget while providing care directly. In the near future, I plan to examine whether the strategy of staying at home to provide care differs for families in different socioeconomic circumstances. Is this choice adopted more readily by members of the working class rather than by women (it's almost always women) in higher income brackets? Women who contribute household work surely help the family come round from month to month, but there is a downside to this habit of which they might not be aware. By reducing

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5 The figure shows that, compared to other European countries, the Netherlands does not have generous parental leaves or a wide availability of childcare services. Nevertheless, Dutch grandparents are unlikely to take care of their grandchildren on a daily basis. There is little necessity to do so, given the low proportion of young mothers with fulltime jobs (Eurostat, 2009).

6 Keck, Hessel, and Saraceno (2009) developed a database of comparative and harmonised indicators of legal and policy frameworks shaping generational interdependence in families (publicly accessible via http://multilinks-database.wzb.eu/). The indicators represent the allocation of responsibilities to the state or to families for (a) caring for children; (b) financially supporting children; (c) caring for frail older persons; and (d) financially supporting older persons. The database focuses on 2004 (the year of GGP-data collections), and changes since then.

their own participation in the labour market, they increase the likelihood that they will suffer poverty in old age.[7]

Different theoretical models?

So far, I have argued that the generosity or restrictedness of public provisions has implications for levels of help exchanged between generations. In what follows, I suggest that the reasons for providing help might differ from place to place. More specifically, I suggest that cross-national comparisons provide critical insight into the applicability of different theoretical models for why members of different generations help each other.

One theoretical perspective starts from the belief that all action is fundamentally 'rational'. Adherents of such a rational choice framework regard intergenerational support as a form of exchange (Emerson, 1976). All social *exchange*, they propose, involves costs and rewards: giving support is a cost for the giver, and receiving it is a benefit for the recipient. The basic idea is that people willingly accept the costs of giving if they anticipate rewards in return. In opposition to the idea that intergenerational behaviour is motivated by self-interest, as exchange theory has it, *altruism* theory proposes that interactions and exchanges are guided by beneficence (Wade-Benzoni & Tost, 2009). The basic idea is that family members care enough about each other to monitor each other's well-being and make transfers to enhance or maintain the other's well-being. Professional fence-building makes it difficult to assess the relative merit of these two approaches. They are used in different disciplines and the results are reported in separate literatures. Exchange theory is popular in economics and sociology, while altruism theory features more prominently in psychology and biology.

In work carried out with Valeria Bordone, a junior researcher at the University of Vienna, I examined whether different explanatory models apply to intergenerational interactions, depending on the place where people live (Bordone & Dykstra, 2012). To begin with, we formulated a number of theories based on common knowledge and the thrust of recent research. One would expect that in northern and western countries, with their more generous welfare systems, the

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7 This question will be addressed in the sub-project 'Back-up functions of families' in the Families in Context research programme for which I received an Advanced Investigator Grant from the European Research Council earlier this year.

altruistic model would be most appropriate. That is, that transfers would flow to the neediest, irrespective of the anticipation of reciprocal help. In the southern and eastern countries of Europe, with their less generous welfare systems, the theoretical assumption is that transfers would be more like exchanges, tit for tat services and visits related to current and future obligations (Komter, 2005). Ultimately, intergenerational interactions in Southern and Eastern Europe were presumed to be driven by more morally binding reciprocity obligations (Viazzo, 2010), whereas responsiveness to needs would be more characteristic of intergenerational interactions in Northern and Western Europe. Valeria Bordone and I set out to test these theories.

Exchange can take different forms (Komter, 2005). One form that is difficult to detect is delayed exchange, when people reciprocate earlier contributions of support that may have taken place at any time in the past. In the study, we dealt with this source of uncertainty by choosing as an indicator for delayed exchange a well-documented variable: parental divorce. Our assumption was that the limited contact and support provided by divorced parents – in particular divorced fathers (Cooney & Uhlenberg, 1990; Kalmijn, 2007) – weakens the motive for reciprocity from children later in life. Another form, when people invest in others in anticipation of future rewards, is termed prospective exchange. For the younger generation we used as a variable the likelihood that a child could expect to receive an inheritance. This tactic was based on evidence that the more wealthy parents are, the more attention and support they receive from their adult offspring (Cox & Rank, 1992). For the older generation we used the geographical distance to the child, reasoning that the closer children live to their parents the more likely they are to reciprocate help (Hank, 2007).

By the tenets of altruism theory, the critical influence guiding intergenerational interactions is not a grand accounting scheme of exchanges, but rather the need of the relational partners. Need is often inferred from the status held by family members. In our study, we expected to find need mainly among students (e.g., Attias-Donfut & Wolff, 2000), parents with young children (e.g. Fingerman et al., 2009; Schenk et al., 2010) and ageing parents in poor health (e.g., Eggebeen & Davey, 1998).

We used data on the frequency of contact between parents and their adult children from the Survey of Health, Ageing and Retirement in Europe (SHARE). Frequent contact, by increasing the likelihood of reciprocal help exchanges, not only

Table 2. Regional contrasts between the importance of exchange and altruism as predictors of the frequency of contact between parents and adult children

	north vs. west	north vs. south	north vs. east	west vs. south	west vs. east	south vs. east
Exchange motives						
Parental divorce	0	0	0	0	0	+
Inheritance > € 50,000	0	0	+	+	+	0
Geographic distance	0	+	+	+	+	0
Altruism motives						
Parent poor health	0	+	+	+	+	0
Child student	0	0	+	0	+	0
Grandchild < age 6	0	0	0	0	0	0

reduces the costs of giving, but also helps support providers to recognise the recipient's needs. Contact frequency is sometimes viewed as a form of support in itself, in that it meets a social need. It is also an indirect indicator of forms of practical support that are too idiosyncratic to measure in large-scale surveys (Kalmijn & Dykstra, 2006). The respondents were parents aged 50 and over; if they had two or more children we selected one of their non-coresident children at random.[8] The thirteen countries in the analysis were Denmark and Sweden (north); Belgium, France, Switzerland, Austria, Germany and the Netherlands (west); Italy, Greece and Spain (south); and the Czech Republic and Poland (east). Our aim was to find out whether reciprocity is a better predictor of contact frequency in Southern and Eastern than in Northern and Western Europe (exchange hypothesis), and whether responsiveness to needs is a better predictor of contact frequency in Northern and Western than in Southern and Eastern Europe (altruism hypothesis). Table 2 summarises the results of tests for regional contrasts. Asterisks denote a significant difference between regions in the magnitude of coefficients, zeros mean there was no measurable difference.

8 In separate analyses we also included coresident children, defining contact frequency as 'daily'. The pattern of findings was highly similar to the analyses omitting children with whom parents shared a household.

Consistent with the exchange hypothesis, the likelihood of future rewards (inheritance, child living nearby) is indeed a better predictor of contact frequency in Southern and Eastern Europe than in the north and the west. The prospect of receiving an inheritance encourages adult children all over Europe to visit and telephone their parents frequently, but the effect is much stronger in countries with parsimonious welfare arrangements. Contrary to the exchange hypothesis, however, we found that the effects of divorce on contact frequency were highly similar across all regions. To this rule there was one exception: there is a sharp break, not covered by the theory, between Southern and Eastern European countries. Divorce dampens parent-child interactions less strongly in Eastern European countries than in Southern European countries. The subsidiary explanation we offer for this unexpected finding is that divorce has less of a stigma in Eastern Europe than in the south because divorce is much more common there (see Eurostat, 2013).

The altruism hypothesis holds up fairly well in Northern and Western Europe for responsiveness to parental needs, which mainly takes the form of poor health. Across the board, poor health tends to depress intergenerational interactions, but our findings show that this effect is weaker in the more generous welfare states. Also consistent with the altruism hypothesis is the finding on the status of the student. Being a student is associated with higher levels of contact with parents in Northern and Western Europe, but not so in Eastern and Southern Europe, where it makes no difference. Note, however, that significant contrasts emerge only with regard to Eastern, not Southern Europe. The effects of grandparenthood are not consistent with the altruism hypothesis. While we expected that responsiveness to needs would be more characteristic of intergenerational interactions in Northern and Western Europe, these turned out to be similar in all the regions of Europe. Instead, an unexpected correlation emerged from the data. In each country in our analyses, we found that adult children see and talk to their parents more frequently when they have young children of their own than when they are childless or have older offspring. The explanation we offer for this is that responsiveness to need is not the only motive for contacts with adult offspring when grandchildren are young. Contacts – regardless of the country of residence – are also an expression of emotional commitment, shared identity, affection, pride and devotion (Segalen, 2010).

Conclusion

In 2011, the Netherlands Royal Academy of Arts and Sciences published the *Dutch research agenda*, which outlined 49 big scientific and scholarly questions facing the academic community.[9] One of the questions is: 'How can we best counter new forms of social inequality?' (pp. 100-101). According to the report, theoretical and methodological progress in understanding the origins and persistence of social inequality requires a focus on families. In today's lecture I have done just that, investigating the interplay between inequality, family practices and policies. Using the example of grandparental care, I showed that national family policies are not neutral. They can further dependencies that limit the autonomy of both young *and* old, or, on the contrary, support an individual's choice to assume heavier intergenerational obligations.

National policies can moreover facilitate gender equity in various ways. Legislation and regulation can make it easier for women with family responsibilities to remain in the labour market; tax relief or other compensation can be provided for those extending heavy care to dependent family members; there are methods for encouraging men to take on more care responsibilities than otherwise (Saraceno & Keck, 2011). Childcare services are not only a relief measure that help parents (mothers) to remain in the labour market. Good quality services are also a resource for children themselves, helping them to widen their relationships with other children and adults, and to overcome the impact of social inequality on cognitive development (McLanahan, 2004). Much work remains to be done on the implications of policy arrangements for inequalities in and between families. Policy makers and academic researchers alike should be conceiving intergenerational policies that do not reinforce class and gender inequalities.

Changing demographic circumstances are extending the length of time that members of multiple family generations share with each other. This new reality compels us more than ever before to acknowledge that individuals are embedded in a complex web not only of horizontal but also vertical ties. It is important not to separate the old and young in families, but to consider them jointly. The separation into 'young' and 'old' phases overlooks the generational

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[9] This is the translation of *De Nederlandse Wetenschapsagenda*, published by the Koninklijke Nederlandse Akademie van Wetenschappen in 2011. Both the Dutch and the English version are available through http://www.knaw.nl.

interdependence of families and fosters a 'chopped-up' notion of what families are about. Using examples from recent studies on retirement and fertility, I showed that a focus on both the young and the old in families points up new angles and research questions. In future research, I would like to show that a fuller account of the advantages and disadvantages passed on across generations requires the consideration of at least two older generations. It is quite likely that older generations exert heavy influence on the younger generation, particularly in societies that have undergone radical transformations, such as Central and Eastern Europe (Mare, 2011) or where children have been left behind by migrant parents (Schmalzbauer, 2008).

Until recently, research on family patterns and family practices rarely included Eastern European countries. Investments in comparative data by national and international research councils have expanded the scope for regional comparisons, enriching my opportunity to study the applicability of theoretical models in different cultural, social and economic contexts. Using data on the frequency of contact between adult children and their parents in a wide range of European countries, I found (at least partial) evidence for regional differences. In countries with stingy social benefits, reciprocity obligations more strongly govern intergenerational interactions, whereas in more generous welfare states altruistic motives come to the fore.

Cross-national comparisons of family practices are not without their methodological problems. Concerns have been voiced about the equivalence of measures across time and place, and about the limited number of countries for which comparable and harmonised data sets are available. Researchers are likely to be misled by the use of similar-sounding terms and may fail to notice that in different countries they can have quite different meanings. These and other systemic biases are being pinpointed; new methods are being developed to correct for them (e.g., Stegmueller, 2011). Techniques are being designed to derive safe inferences even when the number of countries in a sample may seem to be too limited for statistically responsible results (e.g., Jackman, 2009).

Research that combines the key assumptions of 'linked lives' and 'lives in context' can enlarge and improve the body of scientific knowledge on intergenerational family relations in at least two ways. Firstly, a multigenerational view of family ties demonstrates the existence and significance of critical interdependencies between successive generations of family members. Secondly, it faces the reality that

national and regional contexts shape differential opportunities and constraints across generations as well as for men and women. Different policy regimes, varying economic circumstances, cultural idiosyncrasies and social norms prevalent in different parts of the world all have their influence. It's up to us to formulate clear and cogent theories about the linkages that connect these structural forces with family behaviour.

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About the author

Pearl Dykstra was appointed chair of Empirical Sociology at Erasmus University Rotterdam in 2009. Previously, she had a chair in Kinship Demography at Utrecht University and was a senior scientist at the Netherlands Interdisciplinary Demographic Institute in The Hague. She is an internationally regarded specialist on intergenerational solidarity, family change, ageing and the life course, ageing societies, and loneliness. Large scale projects for which she has been awarded grants include the Netherlands Kinship Panel Study (NKPS) and the EU 7th framework program MULTILINKS. She is consortium member of the Generations and Gender Programme (GGP), which was recently placed on the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research National Roadmap for Large-Scale Research Facilities. She is an elected member of the Netherlands Royal Academy of Arts and Sciences (KNAW, 2004) and Vice-President as of 2011, elected Member of the Dutch Social Sciences Council (SWR, 2006), and elected fellow of the Gerontological Society of America (2010).

In 2012 she received the prestigious ERC Advanced Grant for the research project 'Families in context', which will focus on the ways in which policy, economic, and cultural contexts structure intergenerational dependencies in families. Adopting a multigenerational view of family ties, across life phases, it compares and contrasts different theoretical models for why members of different generations help each other. A key premise is that cross-national comparisons will provide critical insight into the applicability of altruism, exchange and norms as explanations for family solidarity.

Pearl Dykstra was a NIAS Fellow in 2002/03 and 2008/09.

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