

Family constellations in Europe: evidence from the GGS

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Research addressing the foundations of family change has drawn attention to several ways of how the developments in mortality, fertility and nuptiality translate into major shifts in family structures that surround individuals at different stages of the life course. The extension of average life expectancy since the onset of epidemiological transition has fundamentally altered the patterns of “co-longevity” in family lineage (e.g. Schoeni 1998; Uhlenberg 1996). Within the same timeframe, the fertility transition has substantially reduced the number of children born to each family. Although this influence has been partly offset by the increased survival, from the perspective of older persons the average number of living children appears currently much smaller than it used to be at earlier stages of demographic development (e.g. Murphy and Grundy 2003; Tomassini and Wolf 2000). Together these developments have paved the way towards the verticalisation of family structure, with more generations alive but fewer members living in each generation (Bengtson 2001). In the context of intergenerational relations, shifts in the family constellations exert considerable influence on the social integration, well-being and solidarity across generations.

The present study, conducted in the framework of FP7 Multilinks project, aims to contribute to research on family constellations by analyzing the data from the Generations and Gender Survey (GGS) for seven countries of Europe that were available to the authors in the early 2009 (Bulgaria, Estonia, France, Georgia, Germany, Hungary, and Russia). In analysing the family constellations, the study proceeds from the “egocentric” perspective. This implies that the survey informant serves for a reference point, and the descending (children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren) and ascending family generations (parents and grandparents) are analysed from his/her position. At the first step, prevalence rates are calculated and analysed for each type of kin covered by the survey, indicating the proportion of individuals with specific types of kin available. At the second step, the evidence concerning the number of family generations above and below the reference individual is combined to highlight the overall profile of generational structure in which individuals are embedded.

In addressing the mentioned issues, the study seeks to map the similarities and dissimilarities in kin availability across the countries and regions of Europe. Further, it aims to cast light on the role of the existing patterns in mortality, fertility and nuptiality in producing these similarities and dissimilarities, and the ways how the differences in kin availability combine into specific patterns of family constellations.

To summarise the main findings, the analysis reveals that the variation in demographic patterns exerts considerable influence on the kin availability but at the same time the specific effects vary depending on the type of kin:

Children. With regard to children, the findings indicate that in most countries of Europe, 85-90% of contemporary elderly have at least one biological child around. Largely the same situation holds true for the generations of middle-aged who will dominate the older population after 2025. Among the countries included in the analysis, Germany stands out for the highest childlessness: it is the only country where the proportion of childless exceeds one fifth of the population, among both middle-aged and elderly population. In a broader framework, this exemplifies the consequences of persistent very low fertility. In the younger GGS generations (under age 40), the ultimate level of childlessness and the ultimate parity distribution is still partly a matter of conjecture but there are indications from fertility studies

that the diversity across countries and regions is bound to increase rather than decrease across Europe. This implies that one should expect more countries with reduced availability of children in the future.

Compared to fertility, differences in longevity were found to exert only a minor influence on child availability. Even in the countries with the highest mortality included in the analysis (e.g. Russian Federation), the difference between the proportion of elderly having children ever-born and surviving does not exceed 3-4%. However, nearly one in five persons aged 70-79 had lost at least one child in these countries. The discrepancy between the two types of measures highlights the protective role of a larger family in the old age.

Parents. Consistent with the levels and trends in life expectancy, the lowest prevalence of parental ties is characteristic of countries with prolonged mortality stagnation, exemplified by the Russian Federation (60.7%). However, the cross-country variation in the availability of parents does not display a straightforward east-west gradient as the highest prevalence of ascending intergenerational ties is found in Bulgaria (70% with at least one parent alive), followed by France (69%). This finding draws attention to the fact that there are yet other factors aside mortality — the timing of childbearing in the parental generation — which shape the availability of ascending kin. Compared to the availability of children, the overall variability in parental ties appears somewhat smaller. From the conceptual point of view, the latter observation lends support for the assertion that of the two major components of generational replacement, fertility assumes a more dynamic role in moulding the cross-national differences in contemporary family patterns.

In the life course perspective, the age-specific prevalence rates of kin availability draw attention to considerable diversity in the timing of the death of parents. Interpreted in the synthetic cohort framework, the observed variation translates into a spread of about 10 years in the age at which the loss of parent(s) occurs in contemporary Europe, with implications to length of the time-span people perform the role of sons and daughters and the stage of life course at which the transition to the position of “omega” generation is experienced.

Grandchildren. The prevalence of multigenerational ties appears indeed lower than the prevalence of relationships between adjacent generations. In contemporary Europe, roughly one third of the adult population aged 20-79 has entered grandparenthood. Across countries, the prevalence of grandchildren varies from 29% in Bulgaria and France to 36-37% in Estonia and the Russian Federation. Overall, the more advanced the stage of demographic ageing the country has reached, the higher tends to be the prevalence of multigenerational ties judged from the general measures.

The transition to grandparenthood typically occurs in mid-life, with considerable variation across countries. In the Russian Federation, the proportion of grandparents amounts to 43% of the respondents in the middle-age group while in Germany the corresponding proportion is limited to only 22%. In the life course framework, this roughly translates to 10-year spread in the modal age of transition to grandparenthood in contemporary Europe. The pattern primarily stems from the differentials in the timing of childbearing, cumulated across two successive generations. Among older age groups, on the other hand, the cross-country differences in the prevalence of grandchildren converge to 6-7 percentage points. In all countries included in the analysis, the prevalence of grandchildren rises to 80% or higher. This finding underscores the role of grandparenthood as an essential part of contemporary family relations after midlife. From another angle, it seems that the increasing importance of multigenerational family ties in modern societies goes hand in hand with rise in the salience of the timing of life course events.

Grandparents. On average, in the countries included in the analysis, about one fifth of the population aged 20-79 has at least one parent still alive. Against the backdrop of the

prevalence of grandchildren, the lower availability of grandparents stems from the restriction of the survey sample to the adult population and the exclusion of children and adolescents. Regarding the overall prevalence of grandparent ties, the countries are quite clearly divided into two groups. In Bulgaria and France, 25-27% of the respondents had grandparent(s) still alive at the time of the survey. In the rest of the countries, the prevalence of grandparent ties appears noticeably lower (around 18%).

The observed levels in the availability of grandparents imply that intergenerational ties between grandchildren and grandparents frequently span 3 or 4 decades with 1 or 2 of these decades involving adult grandparent/grandchild relationships. Unlike in the past, contemporary grandparents increasingly see their grandchildren grow up, complete education, start independent living, form their families and have children. This indeed introduces new dimensions and aspects into the grandparent-grandchild relationships and roles, further adding to the salience of multigenerational bonds in contemporary societies.

Great-grandchildren. According to GGS, the overall prevalence of great-grandchildren does not exceed 5% among the population aged 20-79. Across countries, the highest levels are observed in the Russian Federation and Georgia (4.6% and 4.3%), the lowest levels (1.9% and 2.4%) are characteristic of Germany and France. This makes around 1/10 on the prevalence of grandchildren but it must be remembered that the GGS samples exclude the population aged 80+ among which the likelihood of having grandchildren are highest. The low overall prevalence of grandchildren, however, does not imply that the proportion of individuals having grandchildren is so low if focus on older age groups. In fact, after age 60 the age-specific prevalence starts to increase rapidly and in the oldest age group it reaches quite high levels after age 70. The top-ranking position of the Russian Federation (48% in the age group 75-79) again points to the salient role of rapid generational turnover in bringing about the multigenerational relationships.

The above results resemble the patterns reported in historical studies for the ties with grandchildren. What this analogy tells in a more general fashion, is that in the demographic transition has added at least one layer to the vertical spread of an average family tree.

The second part of the study provides a synthetic account of the family constellations. A convenient way towards such account is provided by the number of generations in family. In the countries included in the analysis, families consisting of three generations appear the most common. On average, three fifths of the respondents are embedded in that type of generational structure. Across countries, the variation in prevalence of three-generation families appears relatively small. In most countries, it ranges slightly above 60% (from 60% in France to 63% in Estonia). Only Germany features a somewhat lower prevalence of three-generation families with 55%.

A strong majority of the remainder of the respondents can be found in two- and four-generation families that make up an almost equal share among the population aged 20-79. On average, 2-generation families account for 18.2% and 4+ generation families make up 17.6% of the GGS respondents. The share of respondents living in five-generation families appears marginal. The proportion between the families with a more complex and simpler vertical structure seems to follow different pattern across countries. In Bulgaria, France and the Russian Federation, 4+generation families outnumber two-generation families. On the other hand, in Estonia, Georgia and Germany, the opposite appears the case. The least common family constellation appears one-generation family. On average, individuals in these families form 4% of the population aged 20-79. Across countries included in the analysis, the prevalence of one-generation families is the highest in Germany where it amounts to 7.8% of the population aged 20-79. In Estonia, France and Georgia, the likelihood of being a solo

individual is about twice lower (3.7%-3.9%). Yet more uncommon appears to be the deprivation of any vertical family ties in the Russian Federation (2.7%) and Bulgaria (1.8%).

Notwithstanding the variation in the prevalence of different family types, the mean number of family generations varies in a narrow range between 2.9 and 3.0 for most of the countries. The single outlier is Germany in which the number of family constellation includes 2.7 generations. In a broader framework, the latter result implies that divergent demographic regimes can produce rather similar outcomes in terms of the vertical “depth” of the family constellation. Among the countries included in the analysis, this is perhaps best exemplified by the comparison of France and the Russian Federation. Leaving aside the more distant past with the onset of demographic transition nearly a century apart, these two countries represent the extremes of demographic regimes that exist in contemporary Europe. In spite the pronounced contrasts in underlying demographic processes, however, the countries feature a strikingly similar family constellation with regard to the number of generations: the difference in the prevalence of specific family types do not exceed 1-2 percentage points and the average number of family generations matches with the two-digit accuracy (2.97 in both countries). Underlying this unexpected finding, the variation in generational distance, set by the timing of childbearing fully offsets the differentials in longevity between the countries.

The account of family constellations obtained from the GGS and analysed in this paper represents a consolidated outcome of the past trends in fertility, mortality and nuptiality over the lifetime of generations covered by the survey. In prospective view this implies that family patterns, observed within as well as across countries, are subject to further transformation. The rise in life expectancy continues to extend the shared survival of generations, and with respect to the adjacent generations (parents and children), its influence will be evidently override the counterbalancing influence of delayed childbearing. With respect to multigenerational ties in which the effects of fertility postponement come together across several generations the outcome is not self-evident. To this end it seems appropriate to question whether a straight-line verticalisation of family ties is about to continue independent of plausible demographic scenarios and regimes. The results of the present analysis provide indications that the answer may not be strictly affirmative. In particular, this assertion relates to Germany where the average number of family generations appears lower than in any other country included in the analysis. Although Germany ranks fairly high in terms of life expectancy, longevity has fallen short to counterbalance the influence of persistent low fertility. In a wider context, the case of Germany underscores the possibility that under the persistence of demographic regimes, the secular trends towards vertical extension of the family constellation may become to a halt or even reverse temporarily. Should the contemporary fertility differentials persist in the decades to come, they are likely to introduce a considerable alteration of family constellations in the future.

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