

## Has Maternal Contact Declined? Evidence for Seven Countries, 1986-2001

Judith Treas, Ph.D. and Zoya Gubernskaya, M.A.  
Department of Sociology  
University of California, Irvine

Family assistance figures prominently in the care of older adults even in countries with well-developed systems of public old age support. There has long been speculation that demographic developments, particularly the rise in female labor force participation and the decline in fertility, could undermine these vital family support systems for the aged (Treas 1977). Research, however, is limited. Although declining intergenerational co-residence of older people is well documented (Costa 1998; Kobrin 1976; Pampel 1992), few studies address changes in other aspects of kin contact, if only because of the lack of longitudinal data on visits and other social contacts. There is some evidence that US older adults have been seeing less of their children than in the 1960s due to a decline in the residential proximity of aging parents and their adult offspring (Crimmins and Ingegneri 1990). Cross-national studies are lacking to establish whether there are common trends or idiosyncratic patterns in the contact between the generations.

Countries have been shown to differ in intergenerational interaction. There are large differences between Western European countries in the likelihood of older adults living alone, differences that hold even with controls for respondent characteristics (age, gender, marital status, socioeconomic status) and for county-level variables (GNP, social spending, housing stock, post-material values) (Pampel 1992). Older adults' co-residence is lowest in Nordic social democratic countries, perhaps because generous social programs reduce the need to share housing and highest in Southern Europe where public supports are less elaborated (Esping-Andersen 1999), as well as in Eastern Europe (Koropeckyj-Cox, Agree, and Botev 2000). Countries with high rates of intergenerational co-residence show more frequent parental contact, even for grown children not living with parents (Hoellinger and Haller 1990; Treas and Cohen 2006).

Of course, kin contact reflects the characteristics of individuals. Across seven developed nations, women have more contact than men do (Farkas and Hogan 1995). Although there are mixed reports on whether married people have more contact with kin than singles (Farkas and Hogan 1995; Treas and Cohen 2006), more education is associated with less frequent interaction with parents (Treas and Cohen 2006). Also, maternal contact declines until late middle age when a rise may indicate the growing needs for assistance by the older generation (Treas and Cohen 2006).

To sum up, there is strong evidence of a widespread decline in co-residence of parents and grown children, but we lack solid evidence that intergenerational interaction has followed a similar course across countries. Although individual characteristics have been linked to the frequency of contact with aging parents, we do not know whether these associations have changed over time. Therefore, this paper has three objectives: 1) to determine whether visits with mother have declined over time, 2) to determine whether other contacts (such as phone calls) have declined over time, and 3) to determine whether

the individual factors associated with the frequency of maternal visits and contact have changed over time. Toward this end, we compare cross-national survey data for seven countries in 1986 and 2001.

## Data and Methods

This paper analyzes data from the 1986 and 2001 Social Networks modules of the International Social Survey Program (ISSP). Collected by independent survey organizations in cooperating countries using a common questionnaire, the data are based on probability samples representative of national populations. Seven countries were surveyed in both years: Australia, Austria, Germany (West), Great Britain, Hungary, Italy, and the United States. Given a selection of countries broadly representative of liberal and conservative welfare regimes as well as Southern and Eastern European states, this fifteen year span of data is arguably the best available for a cross-national investigation of trends in maternal contact. Sample sizes with complete data on the key dependent variable, face to face maternal contact, range from 347 for Austria to 1331 for West Germany in 1986 and from 383 for Austria to 678 for the US in 2001.

The analysis focuses on the population “at risk” of maternal contact—adults, 18 and older, with a surviving mother. Analysis is limited to children who are not living with their mothers. Contact variables are derived from two items. One asks how often the respondent sees or visits the mother. Another asks about other contact besides visiting. The 1986 question specified “either by telephone or letter” while the 2001 question also mentioned fax and e-mail, communication modes that had become common in the intervening years. With sensitivity tests to evaluate alternative coding, categorical measures of frequency were recoded to days per year: daily=365, at least several times a week=104, at least once a week=52, at least once a month=12, several times a year=3, less often=1, never=0.

Independent variables are limited to those available for all seven countries and both years. They include age (10-year categories), sex, marital status (married=1, else=0), years of schooling completed, employment status (employed=1, else=0), frequency of church attendance, number of siblings 18 and older, travel time to mother, and surviving father. Multivariate analyses use OLS, and all results are based on weighted data.

## Findings

Did maternal contact decline between 1986 and 2001? The results in Table 1 offer little support for the idea that grown children’s interaction with their mothers has fallen off. Trends in visiting frequency are mixed. Although there are country-to-country differences in the level of maternal contact, only in Germany and Hungary do both male and female respondents report statistically significant declines in face to face contact at the .05 level. In the U.S., men and women both saw their mothers more often over the 15 year period. The data for “other” contacts offer a more resounding challenge to the notion of declines in intergenerational interaction. For men and women, there were

significant increases in telephone calls and written correspondence in Australia, Great Britain, Hungary, Italy, and the U.S., as well as increases for West German men. Only West German women showed a statistically significant decline. These increases are generally consistent with the greater saturation of telephones and the introduction of personal fax and email communication technologies.

For maternal visits, preliminary results from pooled OLS regressions suggest both continuity and change in the factors associated with visiting. In both years, middle-aged adults (e.g., 35-44) are less likely than younger or older people to see surviving mothers. Consistently, women visit mothers more than men, but the difference drops from nearly 15 more times a year in 1986 to only 10 in 2001. Although married people are not significantly different from singles in 1986, the 2001 data show them to visit mother significantly less often. Although education is negatively associated with visiting in both years, employment status is not. Frequency of church attendance falls short of statistical significance at the .05 level in 1986, but is a significant and positive factor in 2001. Geographic proximity of the generations becomes, if anything, more important over this time period. As for kin availability, having other adult siblings has a comparably negative association on the frequency of visits in 1986 and 2001. Having a surviving father neither prompts more visits with mother nor makes them less necessary.

Compared to the 18-24 year olds, a significant contact disadvantage for phone and written correspondence emerges for the 35+ age group in 2001, perhaps reflecting cohort differences in respondents' and mothers' familiarity with and access to communication technology. Women communicate more often and married people less in both years. Employment is not significant in either year, and education increases other contact only in the earlier survey. Consistently, church attendance is positively related to interaction. Travel time shows a strong negative association even for interaction that does not require face to face contact. Having more adult siblings means fewer phone calls and e-mails.

OLS results by country also show interesting patterns. Net of individual factors, visits increase in every country. Marriage becomes a negative factor for maternal visits in the U.S., Australia and West Germany in 2001, consistent with theorizing about the growing "greediness" of the marital institution. In familistic Italy, only proximity is significantly related to visiting. Several countries (Hungary, Austria) show signs of a gendering of maternal responsibilities--women emerge as significantly more frequent visitors—while other countries (US, Germany, Britain) show gender convergence.

## Conclusions

Based on face to face and other contacts, there is little evidence of a wholesale retreat from intergenerational support for older adults. The results for the raw frequency of maternal visits are mixed, but visits increase in every country when individual characteristics are controlled. "Other contacts" show increases, suggesting that communication technology may actually increase intergenerational interaction. Multivariate results for pooled and country data point to a changing role for gender in the support of older adults.

Table 1: Maternal visit and contact frequency by sex: ISSP Respondents with surviving mothers not co-residing, 7 countries, 1986 and 2001

	Visits		Other contacts	
	1986	2001	1986	2001
	<i>Women</i>			
Australia	50.4	49.0	83.74	104.80
Austria	90.1	107.3	142.52	139.90
Germany (West)	92.5	86.2	135.54	113.75
Great Britain	84.0	81.1	81.12	127.60
Hungary	134.0	128.5	36.88	118.13
Italy	143.8	142.0	159.00	201.78
USA	73.3	83.0	122.89	141.28
	<i>Men</i>			
Australia	39.9	45.4	52.33	58.49
Austria	81.5	81.3	81.71	81.90
Germany (West)	82.0	77.9	91.49	99.90
Great Britain	45.2	48.1	53.62	71.57
Hungary	121.8	110.9	26.52	99.53
Italy	132.9	129.0	127.40	139.91
USA	52.3	58.6	63.44	92.33

## References:

- Costa, Dora L. 1998. *The Evolution of Retirement: An American Economic History, 1880-1990*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Crimmins, Eileen and Dominique Ingegneri. 1990. "Interaction and Living Arrangements of Older Americans and their Children: Past Trends, Present Determinants and Future Implications." *Research on Aging* 12:3-35.
- Esping-Andersen, Gosta. 1999. *Social Foundations of Postindustrial Economies*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Esping-Anderson, Gosta. 1999. *Social Foundations of Postindustrial Economies*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Farkas, Janice I. and Dennis P. Hogan. 1995. "The Demography of Changing Intergenerational Relations." Pp. 1-25. in *Adult Intergenerational Relations: Effects of Societal Change*, edited by V. L. Bengtson, K. W. Schaie, and L. M. Burton. New York: Springer Publishing Company.
- Hoellinger, Franz and Max Haller. 1990. "Kinship and Social Network in Modern Societies: A Cross-Cultural Comparison of among Seven Nations." *European Sociological Review* 6:103-124.
- Kobrin, Frances E. 1976. "The Fall in Household Size and the Rise of the Primary Individual in the United States." *Demography* 13:127-138.
- Koropecjy-Cox, Tanya, Emily M. Agree, and Nicolai Botev. 2000. "Aging, Kin, and Living Arrangements in Eastern Europe: A Cross-National Comparison." *The Gerontologist* 40:283-.
- Pampel, Fred C. 1992. "Trends in Living Alone Among the Elderly in Europe." in *Elderly Migration and Population Redistribution*, edited by A. Rogers, W. H. Frey, A. Speare, Jr., P. Rees, and A. Warnes. London: Belhaven Press.
- Treas, Judith. 1977. "Family Support Systems for the Aged: Some Social and Demographic Considerations" *The Gerontologist* 17:486-491.
- Treas, Judith and Philip Cohen. 2006. "Maternal Co-Residence and Contact: Evidence from Cross-National Surveys." Pp. 117-137 in *Allocating Public and Private Resources Across Generations: Riding the Age Waves*, vol. 2, edited by A. H. Gauthier, C. Y. C. Chu, and S. Tuljapurkar. Dordrecht, Netherlands: Springer/Kluwer Academic Publishers.