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Research Article

Generational interdependencies in families: The MULTILINKS research programme

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Generational interdependencies in families: The MULTILINKS research programme

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Abstract

BACKGROUND

We identify four research themes where MULTILINKS, a programme of research on intergenerational family ties funded through the Seventh Framework of the European Commission, has brought new and unique insights. Key premises of the MULTILINKS approach involved an emphasis on (1) both young and old in families, (2) the ways in which social policies structure interdependencies in families, and (3) the influence of historical, economic and cultural contexts.

METHODS

Our overview includes research done in the context of the MULTILINKS programme at large as well as the papers in this special collection.

RESULTS

Firstly, by combining macro and micro perspectives on intergenerational family constellations across Europe it has been possible to provide a more nuanced view than is common in conventional portrayals of family change. Secondly, by extending research to Eastern European countries, the programme has not only identified crucial regional differences in co-residential arrangements and intergenerational exchanges in families, but also shown that explanations of well-being differentials are similar in Eastern and Western Europe. Thirdly, by focusing on legal and policy frameworks regarding the division of care and financial responsibilities for the young and old between the family and the state, it has been possible to distinguish patterns in the degree to which national policies strengthen or weaken generational interdependencies in families. Fourthly, research conducted in the context of the MULTILINKS

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programme has demonstrated the usefulness of paying attention to preferences about family members' responsibilities for each other.

CONCLUSION

Recognition of the key premises of MULTILINKS has led to challenging, critical insights on intergenerational family ties.

1. Background

The papers in this special collection were prepared in the context of MULTILINKS, a programme of research funded through the Seventh Framework of the European Commission. The full title of the programme is: "How demographic changes shape intergenerational solidarity, well-being, and social integration: A multilinks framework". Nine academic institutes participated in MULTILINKS: the Department of Sociology of the Erasmus University Rotterdam; the Department of Social Demography of the Netherlands Interdisciplinary Demographic Institute in The Hague; the Department of Social Sciences of University College Utrecht; the Research Centre for Longitudinal and Life Course Research of the University of Antwerp; Interface Demography of the Free University, Brussels; Norwegian Social Research, Oslo; the Estonian Institute of Demography, Tallinn University; and the Dondeña Centre for Research on Social Dynamics, University of Bocconi, Milan.

The acronym MULTILINKS reflects the content of the project. Research questions focused on: *multiple linkages* in families (transfers up and down family lineages, interdependencies between older and younger family members, and between men and women in families); *multiple linkages* across time (measures at different points in time, at different points in the individual and family life course); and *multiple linkages* between, on the one hand, national and regional contexts (policy regimes, economic circumstances, normative climate), and, on the other hand, individual behaviour, well-being and values.

MULTILINKS started from three key premises. First, population ageing is not only about older persons: it affects people of all ages. In debates on ageing societies, there seems to be an implicit assumption that demographic ageing primarily affects older persons: their economic situation, health, mobility, social integration, family support and care. Increasing longevity and decreasing birth rates have indeed resulted in larger numbers of older persons both in absolute and relative terms, but with dramatic shifts in the balance between old and young, the worlds of younger age groups have also profoundly changed. The young are growing up in societies where they are a

numerical minority and where they have several generations of family members “above” them. These considerations suggest that attention should be given to people of all ages.

The new demographic circumstances in which members of multiple family generations share several decades together compel us to recognize that individuals are embedded in a complex web of vertical and horizontal ties. Thus, a second key premise is that there are critical interdependencies between family generations and between men and women in families, which are partly based in tradition, and partly built and reinforced by social policies (or by the absence thereof). These interdependencies should not be taken for granted, as is often done. Rather, it is important to address explicitly the ways in which legal and policy arrangements constitute differential opportunities and constraints for men and women and across generations in families.

A third key premise is that to understand interdependencies in families, a spectrum of levels and units must be distinguished and recognized: country, historical generation, family, dyad (partners, parent-child), and the individual. Countries have disparate political, cultural and economic histories, and different welfare state arrangements. To understand the impact of demographic changes on people’s lives, it is not sufficient to consider cross-national differences only. Regional diversity, including urban-rural differences, and social change over time must also be considered - the rapid changes in Central and Eastern Europe being a case in point.

In what follows we will highlight how the MULTILINKS approach—with its emphasis on both young and old in families, the ways in which social policies structure interdependencies in families, and the influence of historical, economic and cultural contexts—has brought new and unique insights. These pertain to *macro and micro* views of intergenerational family constellations, *East-West* differences in intergenerational family patterns and individual well-being, joint consideration of *young and old*, and *preferences predicting behaviour* in families. Both the research done in the context of the MULTILINKS programme at large and the papers in this special collection will be discussed, with a particular emphasis on the latter. The focus is on intergenerational family ties.

2. Macro and micro views of intergenerational family constellations

The conventional portrayal of change in intergenerational family constellations under the influence of macro demographic trends is that the extension of life and the drop in birth rates result in “beanpole” families with relatively many vertical ties (e.g., parents, grandparents and great-grandparents) and relatively few horizontal ties (e.g., siblings, cousins) (Bengtson 2001). Contributors to this special collection (Herlofson and

Hagestad 2011; Puur et al. 2011) provide a more nuanced view. Using micro data from the Generations and Gender Surveys (GGS) (Vikat et al. 2007) they show that, contrary to popular belief, being part of vertically extended families with four or five generations alive at the same time is not the norm. The majority of adults are members of three-generation families.

Note, however, that one would find greater proportions of people in four- and five-generation families if the very old (> 80 years of age) and the very young (< 10 years of age) were included in the GGS samples (Herlofson and Hagestad 2011). Note furthermore, that mapping generational structures is a tricky task. For example, respondents might be part of a three-generational lineage on the paternal side of the family, and part of a five-generational lineage on the maternal side (Herlofson and Hagestad 2011).

Increased longevity and postponed childbearing have opposing effects on the generational structure of families (Matthews and Sun 2006). The extended lifespan means, on the one hand, that older family members are living longer than they did in the past, which in turn suggests that three, four or even five generations of family members may be alive at the same time. Delayed childbearing means, on the other hand, that the age gap between generations is relatively large, which in turns reduces the likelihood that multiple generations are alive at the same time. Micro data make it possible to examine the opposing effects of increased longevity and postponed childbearing on the generational structure of families. Puur and colleagues (2011) show, for example, that the proportions in one-, two-, three- and four-generation families are virtually identical in France and in Russia. The underlying demographic processes are quite different, however. In France, where people tend to live long lives, adults have relatively many ascending family generations. In Russia, where people tend to have children at a young age, adults have relatively many descending family generations.

MULTILINKS findings give little credence to the metaphor of the sandwich generation, which suggests that men and women are caught between simultaneous responsibilities for their parents and children (Puur et al. 2011). Adults typically occupy middle-generation positions between the ages of 30 and 60. This is not a period in life when both young children and elderly parents are likely to need care. For those in the younger part of the age-range (i.e. those with child-care responsibilities), parents are not at risk of frailty. For those in the older part of the age range (i.e. those caring for their parents), children will generally lead independent lives. Other MULTILINKS research shows that people in families with a larger number of generations alive are more, instead of less likely to engage in emotional exchange with their children (Moor and Komter 2012a). Apparently, the so-called sandwich generation does not economize on emotional exchanges. Rather, the presence of multiple generations appears to encourage emotional exchanges up and down family lines.

Though the metaphor of a sandwich generation juggling commitments towards parents and children is clearly a misconception of midlife, it continues to figure prominently in public and policy debates (Dykstra 2010).

MULTILINKS research also challenges contemporary views on the effects of the drop in fertility. In gerontology, decreasing fertility rates over recent decades have received a considerable amount of attention, mostly motivated by a concern for parent care in years to come. It is, however, important to keep in mind that standard measures of fertility are woman-based and therefore not perfectly indicative of the number of children in families with children. As Hagestad and Herlofson (2011) note, the decline in fertility means a decrease in average number of children per woman. It does not necessarily mean that the average number of children among mothers is dramatically lower. A critical factor to consider is patterns of childlessness.

In addition, in previous research little attention has been given to individuals who are vertically deprived in the sense that they have no children or grandchildren, or no surviving parents or grandparents (Herlofson and Hagestad 2011). Whereas an examination of childbearing and mortality patterns informs us about the existence of biological kin, an examination of divorce and separation provides insight into a different form of vertical deprivation, that is, having severed ties. Men are more likely to have broken family ties than women. One should not assume that all adults are part of multigenerational family structures. The focus on a presumed growth in multigenerational families has made researchers and policy makers overlook the substantial number of generational solos: individuals without any direct ascendant or descendant generational links.

3. East-West differences in intergenerational family patterns and individual well-being

Until recently, research on family patterns rarely included Eastern European countries (Moor and Komter 2012a) with the exception of the work inspired by Hajnal's (1965, 1982) scholarship on the St. Petersburg – Trieste dividing line. It has been typical to describe patterns of exchange in European families in terms of a North-South gradient (Albertini, Kohli and Vogel 2007; Hank 2007; Kalmijn and Saraceno 2008; Ogg and Renaut 2006). Intergenerational transfers of time and money among family members tend to be less frequent in the Nordic than in the Southern European countries, with the Continental European countries being somewhere in the middle. Increasingly, data on family exchanges in Eastern Europe are becoming available, drawing attention to the greater prevalence of co-residential arrangements in former communist countries. Intergenerational co-residence (i.e. adults living with their parents) favours the

exchange of support, economic and otherwise (see Heylen et al. 2012 in this special collection). In their contribution, using data from round 2 of the European Social Survey, Jappens and Van Bavel (2012) show large variations across Europe in the rate of intergenerational co-residence, reflecting historical, cultural and socio-political differences (Billari 2004; Iacovou and Skew 2011). More than 48% of the 55-plus live with adult children in Ireland, parts of Spain, Italy, Hungary, and Poland, but less than 15% of the 55-plus do so in Norway, Sweden, Finland and Denmark and most of Germany, Belgium, France, Great Britain and the Netherlands.

As Hagestad (2000) has argued, co-residence might be a matter of degree. Adult family members might not be living together, but nevertheless quite close: in the same building, street, or neighbourhood. Four decades ago, Rosenmayr and Köckeis (1963) introduced the term “intimacy at a distance” to describe ageing parents and adults who live geographically close, but not in the same household. Adult children and parents actively decide—within the restrictions of their independent incomes and housing market opportunities—how far they live from each other. Proximity, however, may not be exogenous to intergenerational support and contact (Grundy and Shelton 2001; Tomassini, Wolf and Rosina 2003). That is, family members might choose to move closer to one another because support is required and expected by one or both generations. To illustrate, Van Diepen and Mulder (2009) found that older people with grandchildren in the Netherlands are more likely to move closer to their children than those without grandchildren. Focusing on Bulgaria and France, Heylen and her colleagues carried out path analyses to examine the endogeneity of the geographic proximity of adult children and their mothers. As reported in this special collection, their results suggest that moving nearer to (France) or moving into (Bulgaria) the parental home is a strategy employed by the younger generation to increase the likelihood of grandparental childcare. Likewise, in Bulgaria (but not in France) a mother’s poor health seems to trigger moving in with each other.

Co-residence patterns provide little insight into the question of who is supporting whom (Cohen and Casper 2002; Smits, Van Gaalen and Mulder 2010; Treas and Cohen 2007). One option is that the adult children have taken in their ageing parents in order to care for them. Alternatively, the adult children might never have left the parental home or might have returned home after experiencing setbacks on the marriage or labour markets (Mitchell 2005). The standard explanation is that a combination of economic necessity and housing shortages underlies intergenerational co-residence (Kobrin 1976; Ruggles 2007; Therborn 2004). According to this explanation, intergenerational co-residence is a form of hidden poverty (Robila 2004), and parents and adult children prefer not to live together. However, residential preferences might differ by country. Italian parents, for example, like to have their children living at home for as long as possible. Wealthy parents “bribe” their children to remain at home,

offering comfort in exchange for their children's presence at home (Manacorda and Moretti 2006).

Compared to previous data collection efforts, the Generations and Gender Surveys have the advantage of including Eastern European countries and containing information on exchanges between family members both within and outside the household. In their contribution to the special collection, De Jong Gierveld, Dykstra and Schenk (2012) describe flows of assistance up and down generational lines in co-residential households where the parent is between the ages of 60 and 80. The direction of "assistance" such as providing help with household tasks, personal care, and financial transfers, tends to be downward. Most often, older parents are helping their adult children (over 60% of cases). The older adult is the primary recipient of assistance in less than 5% of co-resident households. Note that higher proportions of upward transfers might be observed if those aged 80 and over had been included in the sample. Nevertheless, MULTILINKS research demonstrates that, contrary to popular belief, co-resident living arrangements generally respond to the needs of adult children rather than those of the elderly parents. This finding is consistent with studies on older adults living independently, which has repeatedly shown that the direction of intergenerational support flows tends to be primarily downward, from parents to offspring (Albertini, Kohli and Vogel 2007; Attias-Donfut, Ogg and Wolff 2005; Dykstra and Fokkema 2011; Fingerman et al. 2011; Kohli 1999; Schenk and Dykstra 2012). Again, this is contrary to popular belief. Parents become net beneficiaries of help only at an advanced age (> 80 years). Parents want to be parents, and maintain assistance patterns long after the children grow up.

In MULTILINKS, further East-West contrasts emerge with regard to levels of well-being. In this special collection, De Jong Gierveld, Dykstra and Schenk (2012) report that older adults in Eastern Europe tend to be lonelier than age peers in Western Europe. This East-West well-being differential is consistent with earlier work showing lower life satisfaction and poorer self-perceived health in former communist countries than among long-term members of the European Union (Carlson 2004; Delhey 2004). Differences in wealth are largely responsible for these persistent East-West contrasts. De Jong Gierveld and colleagues also trace the higher levels of loneliness in Eastern European countries to the greater likelihood of experiencing financial difficulties, which suggests that loneliness in Eastern Europe might have a large temporal component (linked with a downward business cycle) rather than reflect permanent circumstances (linked with dispositions or personality characteristics) (cf. De Jong Gierveld and Raadschelders 1982). Though De Jong Gierveld and her colleagues had expected to find different predictors of loneliness in East and West, results showed otherwise. Assuming, for example, that older parents in Western Europe attach greater importance to autonomy and independence, one hypothesis was that those living alone

would be less vulnerable to loneliness in Western Europe than in Eastern Europe. Following the same reasoning, another hypothesis was that being primarily on the giving side of intergenerational relationships would provide better protection against loneliness in Western than in Eastern Europe. Analyses revealed that the hypothesized determinants of loneliness operated in a similar way across countries.

In their contribution to this special collection, Moor and Komter (2012b) also show that similar explanatory models apply to Eastern and Western Europe. Their analyses, again using GGS-data, focus on the ways in which having family ties provides protection against depressive feelings. Following the notion of a stronger kinship culture in Eastern than in Western Europe, Moor and Komter had predicted that ties with parents, children, siblings, and partners would be of greater importance in the former than in the latter region. Analyses failed to confirm this prediction, with one exception: being unpartnered (whether never married, divorced or widowed) was more strongly associated with depressive feelings in Eastern than in Western Europe. This result appears to be inconsistent with the findings of De Jong Gierveld and her colleagues regarding loneliness. Note that there are a number of differences between the two studies, which might account for the variable patterns. Apart from using different outcome measures, there is a difference in the measure of partner status. Moor and Komter consider living with or not living with a partner, whereas De Jong Gierveld and colleagues consider living alone, living as a couple, and living with a partner and others. Another important difference is that Moor and Komter consider the entire adult age range, whereas De Jong Gierveld and colleagues focus on the 60-plus age range. In late life, living alone is more likely to be considered part of “normal expectable life” (Neugarten 1969), regardless of the country in which one lives (though life expectancy, particularly for men, is lower in Eastern than in Western Europe, cf. Bobak 2003). Perhaps this is why there is no regional effect for living alone in the loneliness study.

4. Joint consideration of young and old

In MULTILINKS, we did not separate the old and young in families, but considered them jointly. In policy and research communities there tends to be a split between discussions on responsibilities for children and responsibilities for old people. “Family policy” usually refers to young families. Issues related to the old come under different headings: “ageing policy”, “long-term care policy”, or “caregiver burden”. The separation of care and financial policies in “young” and “old” sections is unfortunate because it disregards similarities between the young and old, and overlooks interdependencies across generations. It also provides a “chopped up” notion of what families are about.

In all developed societies, the caring and financial responsibilities for young and old family members are shared in one way or another between families and the state (Kohli, Albertini and Künemund 2010). Governments have always had a strong stake in the effective functioning of families (Goode 2003), but countries differ in their understanding of “proper” intergenerational family relations (Viazzo 2010). Policy and legal arrangements in a particular country create and reinforce generational interdependencies or - on the contrary - lighten them. Laws define rights and duties of younger and older family members towards each other, while policies (or their absence) reward or discourage particular family practices (Leira 2002; Saraceno 2010).

To understand the family/state division of responsibility for the old and the young, three patterns in legal and policy frameworks were distinguished in the context of MULTILINKS (Saraceno and Keck 2010). These patterns distinguish between the degree to which country-specific institutional frameworks support the desire to be responsible towards one’s children and frail aged parents and/or support individual autonomy, thereby partially lightening intergenerational dependencies and the gender division of family labour. The first pattern is *familialism by default*, where there are few or no publicly provided alternatives to family care and financial support. The second is *supported familialism*, where there are policies, usually in the form of financial transfers, which support families in keeping up their financial and caring responsibilities. The third is *defamilialization*, where needs are partly addressed through public provision (services, basic income, pensions). The three patterns in legal and policy frameworks go beyond the public/private responsibilities dichotomy. They also make clear that public support may lighten private, family responsibilities, as well as provide incentives for undertaking them.

Welfare state typologies are popular in cross-national comparative research. Nevertheless, they have clear drawbacks. First, they assume homogeneity among countries belonging to a particular regime type, and second, they lack concrete measures of policies belonging to the respective regime types. MULTILINKS overcomes these limitations. Comparative indicators for all EU 27 countries (plus Norway, Russia and Georgia) of legal and policy frameworks shaping financial and caring responsibilities in families were developed in the context of this program (Keck, Hessel and Saraceno 2009). Note that the indicators represent policy frameworks, not service usage. 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, using existing indicators as far as possible (OECD, EUROSTAT, and MISSOC). Information was also collected through national informants. Care was taken to harmonize information across countries (e.g. financial support is related to the average net national income level).

Care was also taken to be explicit about decisions taken in quantifying the indicators (see Keck, Hessel and Saraceno 2009 for further information). The database has 71 indicators; 48 pertain to responsibilities for the young, and 23 pertain to responsibilities for the old.³ The usefulness of the MULTILINKS database has been illustrated in a number of recent studies (e.g., Aassve, Arpino, and Bordone 2012; Daatland, Herlofson, and Lima 2011; Jappens and Van Bavel 2012; Saraceno 2010, 2011; Saraceno and Keck 2010, 2011; Schenk, Dykstra, and Maas 2010).

In their contribution to this special collection, Saraceno and Keck (2011) examine the extent to which national policies encourage gender equity by, for example, allowing women with family responsibilities to remain in the labour market, acknowledging caring for dependent family members, or supporting men's uptake of care responsibilities. They point to the necessity of considering leave entitlements and services (e.g., childcare, home help) jointly. Moreover, both the duration of care leave and the level of compensation during the leave are important. The actual level of payment is assumed to be a crucial factor in men's decision to take leave. Using a wide range of indicators (e.g. tax benefits, cash for care arrangements, leaves for fathers), the authors show that countries cannot be clustered into clean, internally homogeneous groups, identified by clear and consistent policies. They also show that even national policies are not necessarily homogeneous. Belgium serves as an illustration: the acknowledgement of caregiving in pension schemes, survivor pensions, and eldercare are policies supporting the gender division of labour, whereas the generous provision of parental leave and childcare services support women's labour market participation and financial autonomy.

The MULTILINKS focus on both the young and the old in families points to issues that have been neglected in earlier studies, as recently demonstrated in work on retirement and fertility. Van Bavel and De Winter (2011) show, for example, that 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. They examined whether grandchild care might encourage older workers to leave the labour force before the official retirement age in European countries with arrangements allowing early retirement. Their findings suggest that grandparenthood speeds up retirement, particularly for older women. The "discovery" of grandparents (Segalen 2010) by fertility researchers is another example of new insights gained from considering the young and the old in families simultaneously. A number of studies have shown that the decision to have children is more easily made when support from grandparents is available (Aassve, Meroni, and Pronzato 2011; Hank and Kreyenfeld 2003; Kaptijn et al. 2010). Clearly, the consideration of generational interdependencies in families prompts new research questions.

³ The database is publicly accessible via <http://multilinks-database.wzb.eu>.

5. Preferences predicting behaviour in families

Preferences about family members' responsibilities for each other are generally referred to as family norms (Daatland, Herlofson, and Lima 2011). They not only reflect the cultural climate in which people live (Daatland and Herlofson 2003; Kalmijn and Saraceno 2008), but also the individual circumstances in which they find themselves (Gans and Silverstein 2006). Family norms are of interest because they are predictive of intergenerational support behaviour: they predispose people to behave in a certain way towards their family members. Family norms are also of interest because they serve as a source of information for policymakers (Dykstra and Fokkema 2012). The answers to questions about people's wishes for care and about the types of care people are prepared to give, provide insight into the extent to which policy measures are in keeping with public attitudes. They also offer tools for developing policy that enables or promotes the application of personal preferences. In MULTILINKS we show that the consideration of people's preferences leads to a better understanding of intergenerational exchanges in families.

As reported in this special collection (Aassve, Arpino and Goisis 2012), a focus on unobserved preferences reduced the bias of estimates of the contribution of grandmothers' childcare to daughters' labour force participation. Aassve and his colleagues distinguished three hypothetical types of families. In the first type (traditional families), both the mother and the grandmother have objections to women working outside the home, family ties are strong, and there is a preference for family childcare rather than formal childcare. In the second type (modern families), both the mother and the grandmother are in favour of women's employment, family ties are weak, and there is a preference for formal childcare. In the third type (mixed families), the mother espouses modern values but the grandmother is traditional, the mother is highly motivated to work outside the home, and the grandmother is available to provide help because she has no job outside the home. In countries with a large share of traditional families, the magnitude of the effect of caregiving by grandmothers on women's labour force participation is likely to be underestimated given mothers' preference to care for their children themselves. In countries with a large share of modern families, the magnitude of the effect is also likely to be underestimated, but this time because children are likely to be in formal care. In countries with a large share of mixed families, the magnitude of the effect of caregiving by grandmothers on women's labour force participation is likely to be overestimated because there is a high need for childcare and grandmothers are available to provide that care. A positive association between care provided by grandparents and maternal employment emerged in each of the seven Generations and Gender Survey countries under investigation (France, Germany, the Netherlands, Hungary, Bulgaria, Georgia, and Russia). However, the

magnitude of the association was underestimated in France, Germany, Hungary and Bulgaria, and overestimated (but less strongly so) in the Netherlands, Georgia and Russia. Aassve and his colleagues attribute the underestimation in France and Germany to a relatively high prevalence of modern families, and the overestimation in the Netherlands to a relatively high prevalence of mixed families. Unfortunately it is not entirely clear how to account for the findings in Hungary, Bulgaria, Russia, and Georgia.

Caregiving by grandparents is also the topic of the contribution of Jappens and Van Bavel (2012) to this special collection. Taking cultural diversity in Europe as their starting point, they examined whether preferences influence childcare decisions regardless of the availability of public childcare provisions. Using data on 23 European countries from the second round of the European Social Survey, they not only considered individual views on gender roles (e.g. agreeing with the statement “A woman should be prepared to cut down on her paid work for the sake of her family”), but also the conservatism of the cultural climate in the region of residence. The region pertained to level 1 of the Nomenclature of Territorial Units for Statistics (NUTS1). Not surprisingly, the reliance on grandparents as the primary source of childcare was inversely related to the availability of public childcare provisions (as measured by indicators from the MULTILINKS database). Mothers’ views on gender roles showed no association with the likelihood of relying on grandparental care (probably because of the strong connection with employment outside the home). However, the normative climate of their region of residence proved to be a strong predictor of the reliance on care given by grandparents. Mothers in more conservative regions were more likely to rely on grandparents as their primary source of childcare than mothers in less conservative regions. Their results clearly show that European patterns of childcare use are not only structured by the availability of public childcare provisions, but also by cultural preferences in the region of residence.

6. Conclusion

Both the research done in the context of the MULTILINKS programme at large and the contributions to this special collection of papers illustrate that the three key premises of the MULTILINKS programme have led to challenging, new insights. The three premises were that (1) demographic ageing affects both the older and the younger generation; (2) there are critical interdependencies between family generations and between men and women, which are in important ways structured by social policies; (3) family interdependencies should be understood and analyzed at different geographical levels (country, region) and in different family units (generation, family, dyad, individual).

In our overview, we identified four research themes in which MULTILINKS research has made a difference. Firstly, by combining macro and micro perspectives on intergenerational family constellations across Europe it was possible to provide a more nuanced view than is usual in conventional portrayals of family change, for instance, by demonstrating that demographic trends can have opposing effects on the generational structure of families. Another illustration pertains to fertility patterns, where a distinction should be made between a decrease in the average number of children per woman and the average number of children among mothers.

A second important contribution of the MULTILINKS programme concerns the comparison between Eastern and Western European countries. Comparative research on intergenerational family ties and subjective well-being has been scarce so far. Our research has highlighted characteristic cross-country differences in co-residence, reflecting historical, cultural and socio-economic differences; new insights into the meaning of these family patterns and their various possible interpretations have been provided. As far as subjective well-being is concerned, East-West comparisons reveal a mixed picture. More loneliness among older adults is found in Eastern than in Western European countries, but similar levels of mental well-being are found in both groups of countries. Particularly noteworthy is that explanations of well-being differentials are similar in Eastern and Western Europe.

The third way in which the MULTILINKS programme has proven to be innovative is in its joint consideration of the young and the old. By focusing on the legal and policy frameworks in the various European countries, it was possible to distinguish patterns in the degree to which policies strengthen or weaken intergenerational dependencies in the areas of family (child and elder) care and financial support. New insights were also gained on the ways in which national policies encourage or discourage gender equity, for instance, through policies facilitating women's labour market participation or arrangements supporting men's uptake of care responsibilities.

Fourthly, and finally, research conducted in the context of the MULTILINKS programme has demonstrated the usefulness of paying attention to preferences about family members' responsibilities for each other. These preferences are not only a reflection of the cultural climate in which people live, but can also serve as a source of information to policy makers; potential discrepancies between family norms and existing policy may offer tools for developing policy to bridge these gaps. To gain insight into the reliance on grandparents as source of childcare, MULTILINKS research showed, for example, that it helps to consider preferences for traditional breadwinner arrangements both at the level of families and at the level of region of residence.

In addition to these four general demonstrations of how the MULTILINKS programme has challenged existing views on intergenerational relations in families, a few specific findings may serve as further illustrations. Common among them is that

they contradict or nuance popular beliefs about contemporary family life. For instance, the belief that demographic trends have resulted in so-called “beanpole” families with many vertical ties and few horizontal ties has to be nuanced; the majority of adults are members of three-generation families, and not of vertically extended families with four or five generations alive at the same time. Another popular belief is reflected in the metaphor of the sandwich generation: the idea that men and women are caught between simultaneous responsibilities for their parents and children. Research results do not offer support for this idea: adults, for the most part, occupy middle-generation positions between the ages of 30 and 60, a period when neither young children nor elderly parents are likely to need care. A third popular belief holds that co-resident living arrangements respond more to the needs of ageing parents than to those of their adult children. The opposite proves to be the case: the older adult is the recipient of care in less than 5% of co-resident households, and the provider of care in over 60% of cases. The same pattern – assistance mainly flowing downward, from parents to their adult children – is found in studies on older adults living independently. A final illustration ensuing from MULTILINKS research concerns the often-assumed homogeneity of welfare state typologies. Research results presented in this special collection demonstrate that countries cannot be clustered into uniform and homogenous groups, characterized by consistent policy arrangements. Even at a national level, policies are not always completely homogenous.

Since the start of the MULTILINKS programme in 2008, a range of research papers has been inspired by the programme – those already published elsewhere and those included in this special issue. Together, these publications demonstrate how research that takes the key assumptions of the MULTILINKS programme into account has enlarged and improved the body of knowledge in contemporary research on intergenerational family relations, by addressing new research questions and giving novel answers to old questions.

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