

Frequency of Maternal Visits and Other Contacts, 1986-2001: A Cross-National Analysis

Judith Treas and Zoya Gubernskaya
University of California, Irvine

There has long been speculation that demographic developments, such as the decline in fertility, could undermine these vital family support systems for the aged in developed countries (Treas 1977). Declining intergenerational co-residence of older people is well documented (Costa 1998; Kobrin 1976; Pampel 1992), but few studies address changes in other aspects of kin contact, if only due the scarcity of longitudinal data. Due to a decline in proximity, older Americans see less of their children than in the 1960s (Crimmins and Ingegneri 1990), but cross-national studies are lacking. With cross-national survey data for seven countries in 1986 and 2001, this paper seeks to determine: 1) whether visits with mother declined, 2) whether other contacts (e.g., phone calls) declined, and 3) whether the associations of individual factors with the frequency of maternal contact changed.

The likelihood of older adults living alone differs among Western European countries, even controlling for respondent characteristics (age, gender, marital status, socioeconomic status) and 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 due to social programs reduce the need to share housing and highest in Southern Europe where public supports are limited (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). For seven nations, women have more contact than men (Farkas and Hogan 1995). There are mixed reports on whether married people have more kin contact than singles (Farkas and Hogan 1995; Treas and Cohen 2006), but education is associated with less frequent interaction with parents (Treas and Cohen 2006). Maternal contact declines at least until late middle age when the needs of the older generation increase (Treas and Cohen 2006).

Data and Methods: This paper uses data from the 1986 and 2001 Social Networks modules of the International Social Survey Program (ISSP). Seven countries were surveyed in both years: Australia, Austria, Germany (West), Great Britain, Hungary, Italy, and the United States. Broadly representative of liberal and conservative welfare regimes, as well as Southern and Eastern European states, the ISSP is arguably the best available cross-national data for a

study of time trends in maternal contact. Sample sizes with complete data on a key dependent variable, face to face maternal contact, range from 340 for Austria to 1,119 for West Germany in 1986 and 345 for Great Britain to 581 for the U.S. in 2001.

The analysis focuses on those “at risk” of maternal contact—adults, 18 and older, with a surviving mother. Analysis is limited to respondents not living with their mothers. One dependent variable is how often the respondent sees or visits the mother. For “other contact”, the 1986 question specified “either by telephone or letter” while the 2001 question also mentioned fax and e-mail. Response categories have been coded as: daily=6, at least several times a week=5, at least once a week=4, at least once a month=3, several times a year=2, and less often=1.

Independent variables, drawn from the research literature, 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), household income, frequency of church attendance, number of siblings 18 and older, and travel time to mother. Multivariate analyses use OLS, and all results are based on weighted data.

Findings: Did maternal contact decline between 1986 and 2001? The means for the scale of maternal visit frequency is shown in Table 1. Only in West Germany and Hungary do both male and female respondents report statistically significant changes, i.e., declines, in visits ($p < .05$). “Other” contacts show significant increases in sons’ and daughters’ phone calls and letters in Australia, Great Britain, Hungary, Italy, and the U.S., as well as increases for West German sons. Only West German women showed a statistically significant decline.

OLS regressions for the mean on the frequency of maternal visits measure are presented in Table 2. Pooling respondents for all countries, Model 1 includes dummy variables for year (2001) and each country (U.S. is the reference category). There were no significant changes between 1986 and 2001. Only Australians visit their mothers less frequently than Americans while British, Germans, Austrians, and especially Hungarians and Italians visit their mothers more often. When individual characteristics are controlled (Models 2 and 3), respondents visited their mother significantly more often in 2001 than in 1986. Also, only Italians and Hungarians visit their mothers more frequently than Americans. By far the strongest predictor of visiting frequency is travel time to mother. Including this predictor increases R-square from 11% (Model 2) to 62% (Model 3). The square term is negative and also significant, which means that the

decrease in visits is smaller when travel time is very long. As for individual variables, women visit mothers more frequently than men. Older adults, especially 35-54, visit their mothers less frequently than youths, ages 18-24. The married and those with more siblings visit mothers less frequently than those without spouses and with fewer or no siblings. Religious individuals visit mothers more often. Education and family income are not significant.

In results not shown, we run Model 3 for each country separately to see whether the coefficients for individual-level factors are consistent across the countries. In all countries, there were significantly more visits in 2001 than 1986. In all countries the strongest predictor of visits is travel time: the longer the time, the less frequently adult children visit. Females visit mothers more often than males in Australia, Germany, Great Britain and Hungary, but there are no significant gender differences in Austria, Italy and U.S. Marriage decreases visits only in Australia, Germany and the U.S. The effect of age is inconsistent. Only in the U.S. do young adults, 18-24, visit more frequently than all other age groups. Siblings significantly decrease visits with mother only in Austria, Germany, and Italy. Net of the other factors, religious individuals pay visits to their mothers more frequently in the U.S., and to a lesser degree, in Germany and Italy. Since the interactions of survey year and independent variables are not significant, there was no 1986-2001 change ($p < .001$) in the relation of respondent characteristics and maternal visits.

For “other” contact, similar OLS analyses (not shown) confirm an increase in frequency and show that travel time, i.e., distance, has a strong negative association, even for interaction that requiring face to face contact. Other contact drops after age 35, perhaps reflecting cohort differences in access to communication technology. Education is a significant positive influence on other contact, but only in the earlier year.

Conclusions: There is surprisingly little evidence of a retreat from intergenerational support for older parents. Although trends in the raw frequency of maternal visits are mixed, other contacts generally increased across countries, a trend generally consistent with the greater saturation of telephones and the introduction of personal fax and email. Controlling for individual characteristics, maternal visits occurred significantly more often in 2001 than in 1986 in all seven nations. Trends in several variables underpinning kin contact (e.g., sibling numbers, travel time) moved in unfavorable directions, but other, unmeasured forces worked to offset these factors.

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.

Table 1. Mean frequency of visits (scale from 1 to 6) with mother by sex: Respondents with surviving, non-co-resident mother in 7 countries, 1986 and 2001

	<i>Women</i>		<i>Men</i>	
	<i>1986</i>	<i>2001</i>	<i>1986</i>	<i>2001</i>
Australia	3.17	3.18	2.98	3.05
Germany (West)	3.79	3.68	3.64	3.50
Great Britain	3.82	3.73	3.16	3.20
USA	3.41	3.49	3.14	3.32
Austria	3.78	3.89	3.87	3.66
Hungary	4.37	4.15	4.16	3.89
Italy	4.33	4.45	4.33	4.36

Table 2. OLS regression models for frequency of visits with mother

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
<i>(Male)</i>			
Female		0.116** (0.037)	0.177*** (0.025)
<i>(Age 18-24)</i>			
Age 25-34		-0.130 (0.072)	-0.192*** (0.047)
Age 35-44		-0.355*** (0.073)	-0.318*** (0.049)
Age 45-54		-0.549*** (0.078)	-0.318*** (0.051)
Age 55 and older		-0.586*** (0.094)	-0.196** (0.064)
<i>(Not married)</i>			
Married		0.010 (0.049)	-0.111*** (0.033)
Number of siblings		-0.092*** (0.011)	-0.042*** (0.007)
Education (years)		-0.063*** (0.007)	0.007 (0.005)
Family income		-0.031 (0.016)	-0.013 (0.011)
Church attendance		0.088*** (0.011)	0.039*** (0.007)
Travel time to mother			-0.867*** (0.024)
Travel time to mother squared			0.042*** (0.003)
<i>(Year 1986)</i>			
Year 2001	-0.014 (0.036)	0.101* (0.039)	0.551*** (0.026)
<i>(U.S.)</i>			
Australia	-0.242*** (0.059)	-0.217*** (0.061)	-0.096* (0.037)
W. Germany	0.339*** (0.059)	0.211*** (0.063)	0.055 (0.041)
Great Britain	0.159* (0.062)	0.144* (0.073)	-0.087 (0.047)
Austria	0.464*** (0.072)	0.348*** (0.073)	0.020 (0.053)
Hungary	0.794*** (0.068)	0.697*** (0.075)	0.378*** (0.050)
Italy	1.028*** (0.069)	0.854*** (0.073)	0.373*** (0.046)
Constant	3.349*** (0.045)	4.408*** (0.130)	5.768*** (0.088)
N	7,918	7,231	6,953
R-squared	0.062	0.109	0.616

Robust standard errors in parentheses *** p<0.001, ** p<0.01, * p<0.05