

Intergenerational Residential Proximity: an European comparison

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Long summary

1. Introduction

In an aging society, the availability of substitutes for formally provided services is of immediate policy significance, and proximity between family members guarantees the possibility (at least theoretically) of finding help within the family. Moreover, the growing number of couples where both partners work out of home emphasizes the importance of proximity between children and their grandparents for helping parents in childcare.

Consequently, the interest in family ties and family networks has considerably spread. Shelton and Grundy (2000) found that more than the 60% of British people aged 18-54 live within half an hour travel to their parents, which roughly corresponds to the percentage calculated by Glaser and Tomassini (2000) of those living within 10 miles. Mulder and Kalmijn (2004) and van Diepen and Mulder (2005) computed both the minimum and the mean distance of elderly parents with their children for the Netherlands, respectively amounting to about 29 and 16 kilometres, and Fransson and Teeland (2004) concluded that about the 70% of old Swedish people aged 75 years and older live within 15 kilometres to at least one child, distance that the authors considered reachable by “a comfortable bus ride”. Barbagli et al. (2004) found that in Italy 65% of couples married during 1990s, at the time of marriage lived within 1 kilometre to at least one parent.

Further research is then available for some non European countries: Choi (2003) focusing on the United States, determined that about the 19% of unmarried elders lived with at least one child and/or grandchild, while Rogerson, Weng and Lin (1993) found that for about one quarter of adult children the parents lived closer than 5 miles distance (approximately 8 kilometers); Bian, Logan and Bian (1998) calculated that in the urban China more than the 60% of elderly people live in the same district as at least one child.

Finally, in a comparative research Jowell et al. (1989) showed that during the 1980s there were huge differences in the distance between parents and children among industrialized countries:

Residence of parents and children in some industrialised countries during the 1980s.

	<i>UK</i>	<i>USA</i>	<i>Australia</i>	<i>Germany</i>	<i>Austria</i>	<i>Hungary</i>	<i>Italy</i>
Proportion % of parents living with at least ...							
... an adult son	32	21	30	40	39	37	60
... an adult daughter	29	14	25	26	25	30	58
Proportion % of adult children not living with parents whose mother lives at a distance of ...							
... 15 minutes of less	32	27	24	38	37	43	57
... 15 minutes – 1 hour	40	31	33	30	35	35	26
... 1 – 5 hours	19	19	20	22	23	19	8
... 5 hours or more	9	23	23	9	4	4	4
<i>Proportion % of adult people living near their mother (1 hour or less) who see her every day</i>	11	16	7	20	17	32	32

Source: Jowell et al. (1989)

With respect to European countries, these differences are rooted in the past. Differences may reflect the East/West contrast (Hajnal, 1965) as well as North/South contrast (Reher, 1998).

2. Aims

Given the aim of getting insights on family support related issues, the existing empirical research focusing on residential proximity mainly considered the distance between older parents and their adult children. However, findings in this respect are not easily comparable, due to the fact that different authors considered different distances as the variable of interest (the mean distance with children, the minimum distance, each distance between dyads) and also specified different proximity measures: a distance can be measured as the kilometers between two locations, or according to qualitative categories obtained on the basis of geographical distances, or again as time needed to cover the geographical distance.

Many of those analyses also focused upon the determinants of the spatial separation between children and parents, usually finding an important role of gender, level of education, marital status, region of residence, nest leaving age and mobility history. However, the role of those variables can vary depending on the country. As an example, a comparative study between Britain and Italy showed that while in Britain the needs of older generation were more important than in Italy to determine proximity, in Italy the needs of children played a greater role (Glaser and Tomassini, 2000).

The aim of this paper is to describe proximity between adult children and their parents and parents in law (when present) in several European countries, and to give further insights on the determinants of proximity and of their role in each country, using a multi-countries survey held in July 2005.

3. Data and methods

We use data collected by LaPolis (University of Urbino) and Fondazione Nord Est as part of an international project on Immigration and Citizenship in Europe. The surveys, carried out in July 2005, involved six European countries: Italy, France, Germany (CATI survey); Poland, Hungary and Czech Republic (face-to-face survey). For each country, a representative sample of the adult population (15+) of about 1,000 people is now available. We asked the distance with mother (at the time of the interview if mother is still alive, at her death if she is dead), mother-in-law (for married people) or the mother of cohabiter (for cohabiting people). As data for Poland are slightly different – concerning only distance from mother and mother-in-law for married people at the time of marriage – comparison with other countries is limited.

These variables on intergenerational proximity can be combined with both structural characteristics (sex, age, family dimension, education, job, the dimension of municipality, region of residence, income, etc.) and some attitudes (political orientation, religiosity, trust in others, etc.).

The contributions from this study are twofold. On the one hand, we compare data across six European countries concerning family proximity between parents and children and between children and parents-in-law (when present), and on the other hand analyse the possible determinants of such proximity and the way their impact differs between countries.

The first part is pursued both considering proximity with parents and parent in law separately, and combining those indicators. E.g., for each country we will construct tables as the following:

Proportion of Italian couples who – at the time of marriage – lived within one kilometer to...

	Year of marriage				
	53-57	63-67	73-77	83-87	93-97
...at least one parent	68	63	62	65	65
...parents of groom	60	51	47	51	47
...parents of wife	42	39	42	40	45
...parents of both partner	27	21	20	21	20

Source: Barbagli et al. (2004)

In the second part, in order to measure the association between intergenerational proximity and structural or ideational variables, we will use some regression models, performed for data of each country and for the pooled data-file. In the latter case, country is considered as an explanatory variable, and interaction between country and the other explanatory variables are taken into account, in order to highlight if the association between proximity and the other variables (sex, age, etc.) really changes according to the country.

4. First results

As the following tables show, there are strong differences between West, East and South. In Italy, children live nearest to both mother and mother of partner compared with all other countries, whereas Germany and France show the lowest proximities between parents and children, and the Central-Eastern European countries are in an intermediate position. The picture is slightly more confused when we analyse proximity with parents in law, but strong differences across European countries still persist.

How far from the house of your mother do you live today? If mother died, specify how far at the moment of her death

	ITA	FRA	GER	HUN	CZE
Column frequencies					
<i>I live with her</i>	35.6	24.4	17.9	29.8	25.5
<i>In the same block but in a different flat/house</i>	7.7	6.2	8.4	2.7	5.9
<i>Less than 1 kilometer</i>	13.8	5.2	7.6	14.2	13.0
<i>1-10 kilometers</i>	21.4	18.1	19.1	24.8	24.3
<i>10-50 kilometers</i>	10.8	15.5	20.7	15.4	17.8
<i>50-100 kilometers</i>	3.2	5.9	12.1	3.9	7.0
<i>More than 100 kilometers</i>	7.4	24.6	14.3	9.2	6.5
<i>Total</i>	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Cumulated frequencies					
<i>I live with her</i>	35.6	24.4	17.9	29.8	25.5
<i>In the same block but in a different flat/house</i>	43.4	30.6	26.2	32.5	31.3
<i>Less than 1 kilometer</i>	57.2	35.9	33.8	46.7	44.4
<i>1-10 kilometers</i>	78.6	53.9	52.9	71.4	68.7
<i>10-50 kilometers</i>	89.4	69.5	73.6	86.9	86.5
<i>50-100 kilometers</i>	92.6	75.4	85.7	90.8	93.5
<i>More than 100 kilometers</i>	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
<i>Total of interviewed people</i>	900	902	901	1,240	964

Only for people living with a partner: How far from the house of your mother-in-law (or your partner's mother) do you live today?

	ITA	FRA	GER	HUN	CZE	POL(*)
Column frequencies						
<i>I live with her</i>	7.1	1.7	2.4	9.9	3.9	17.5
<i>In the same block but in a different flat/house</i>	8.1	5.9	6.0	4.5	3.0	7.6
<i>Less than 1 kilometer</i>	20.7	7.3	6.8	17.8	13.2	10.5
<i>1-10 kilometers</i>	32.9	26.4	22.4	29.2	36.9	30.7
<i>10-50 kilometers</i>	15.8	19.9	24.5	19.7	25.3	16.6
<i>50-100 kilometers</i>	3.2	6.0	17.1	6.6	8.0	7.1
<i>More than 100 kilometers</i>	12.2	32.8	20.7	12.2	9.6	10.0
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Cumulated frequencies						
<i>I live with her</i>	7.1	1.7	2.4	9.9	3.9	17.5
<i>In the same block but in a different flat/house</i>	15.2	7.6	8.4	14.5	6.9	25.1
<i>Less than 1 kilometer</i>	35.9	14.9	15.3	32.3	20.1	35.6
<i>1-10 kilometers</i>	68.7	41.3	37.7	61.5	57.1	66.3
<i>10-50 kilometers</i>	84.6	61.2	62.2	81.2	82.4	82.8
<i>50-100 kilometers</i>	87.8	67.2	79.3	87.8	90.4	90.0
<i>More than 100 kilometers</i>	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Total of interviewed people	574	535	558	656	571	708

(*) Only married people at time of marriage

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