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Bernhard Nauck and Anja Steinbach

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Intergenerational Relationships

Bernhard Nauck and Anja Steinbach

Chemnitz University of Technology

(bernhard.nauck[at]phil.tu-chemnitz.de; anja.steinbach[at]phil.tu-chemnitz.de)

Abstract

Intergenerational relationships within family and kinship have become a salient issue in scientific research. Major reasons were intense demographic changes in the 20th century, such as the increased life expectancy in combination with decreased fertility, and its implications for major institutions of the social welfare state. This has resulted in the realization of several larger studies, which may serve for the analysis of the situation of old aged people, such as the German Socio-economic Panel, the Generations and Gender Survey, the Family Survey, the German Aging Survey, the Survey on Health, Ageing and Retirement in Europe, and the Panel Analysis of Intimate Relationships and Family Dynamics. However, an overarching theoretical and research perspective on intergenerational relationships from their creation (fertility) over parenting to the most long-lasting relationship between adults of different generations is still missing. In order to overcome this deficiency, the paper recommends for future data structures to obtain information on intergenerational relationships (1) simultaneously and complete, (2) in a life-span perspective, (3) from a panel design, and (4) a multi-actor design. Studies should (5) account for cultural variability of intergenerational relationships and (6) for institutional settings in cross-national comparisons.

Keywords: Intergenerational Relationships, Intergenerational Solidarity, Life Course, Demographic Change, Ageing, Panel Studies

1. Introduction

Intergenerational relationships within family and kinship have become a salient issue in the public discourse as well as in scientific research. Major reasons were intense demographic changes in the 20th century, such as the increased life expectancy in combination with decreased fertility, and its implications for major institutions of the social welfare state. In the social sciences, this has resulted – since the end of the 1990s – in the planning and realization of several larger studies of the situation of old aged people in Germany and Europe, including the relationships to family members. It has also resulted in the implementation of instruments regarding parent-child-relationships in already existing or newly initiated longitudinal surveys. Due to the urgent political issues, the initial research on intergenerational relationships in families in the context of demographic changes has focused on the relationships between *aged* parents and their *adult* children, generally around the question of family based caring potentials and intergenerational solidarity in later life stages. Accordingly, data collection was concentrated on the relationships between children and their (very) old parents. This research domain was thus located at the interface between family research and aging research. Being labeled as *research on intergenerational relationships*, it is at present well distinguished from *research on parent-child-relationships* as a classical research domain of parenting within developmental psychology and socialization research. *An overarching theoretical and research perspective on intergenerational relationships from their creation (fertility) over parenting to the most long-lasting relationship between adults of different generations is still missing.*

2. Theoretical Developments and Research Questions

2.1 Theoretical Developments

Most of the literature regarding intergenerational relationships starts with a reflection on the family-in-crisis-hypothesis. To test this hypothesis, but also to give a descriptive picture, various aspects concerning these relations are considered. The most important contributions

are the theory of intergenerational solidarity (Bengtson and Roberts 1991; Bengtson 2001) and the work on ambivalence (Lüscher and Pillemer 1998; Pillemer and Lüscher 2004). In these contributions many different aspects of contact and supportive behavior within the family and between generations are discussed. Heavily based on social exchange theory, intergenerational relationships are understood as any form of exchange between generations. Six exchange dimensions are distinguished, namely structural, associative, affective, consensual, normative and functional solidarity.

The *structural dimension* refers to the opportunity structure which determines the specific realization of family interactions. Typical measurements are geographical distance and residential proximity; but availability of kin, parents, children and siblings, as well as their age, sex, marital status, health status and working arrangements are also seen as important factors of structural solidarity. The *associative dimension* refers to the amount and kind of intergenerational contact, either face-to-face or by phone, e-mail or any other means. Therefore, frequency and intensity of contact can be distinguished. The *affective dimension* comprises emotional closeness as well as conflict as measures of the quality of the relationship between children and their parents. The *consensual dimension* measures the amount of agreement in values and beliefs – whatever the specific content of these convictions may be. The *normative dimension* refers to the extent of commitment to filial and parental obligations by the respective members of intergenerational relationships. The *functional dimension* measures all kinds of financial, instrumental and emotional support, exchanged between parents and children.

However, the various types of interaction between generations are not always positive. Intergenerational relations can – and typically do – comprise both positive and negative components, and thus are to some extent *ambivalent*. This is due to the social character of intergenerational relationships, being in most cases unavoidable and unescapable, rather “diffuse” in their exchange and thus “packaged”. It is an open debate whether ambivalence should be measured directly, for example by asking about the amount of simultaneously positive and negative, and thus ambivalent, emotions or whether ambivalence should be

concluded indirectly from the extent of simultaneous emotional closeness and conflict between generations.

Theoretical discussions around intergenerational relationships were long time (and to some extent still are) limited to the question, whether these dimensions are adequate (Szydlik 2000) or complete (Bengtson et al. 2002; Lüscher and Pillemer 1998). More recent discussions have become increasingly critical and point to the theoretical deficits of the well established paradigms (Dallinger 2002; Hammarström 2005; Katz et al. 2005; Grünendahl and Martin 2005), but serious attempts of theoretical explanations of the emergence of and the change within and between the respective dimensions of intergenerational relationships are still very seldom (Merz et al. 2007; Steinbach and Kopp 2008a). In conclusion one may state that apart from the heuristic model of Szydlik (2000), which includes the associative, affective, and functional dimensions and relates them to opportunity, need, family and cultural-contextual structures, no elaborated theory of intergenerational relationships exists.

2.2 *Research Questions*

Empirically, several different analyzing strategies can be distinguished with regard to the respective aspects of intergenerational relationships (Steinbach and Kopp 2008a).

2.2.1 Intergenerational Solidarity

Within this research domain, a first group of studies focuses on the internal structure of the dimensions of intergenerational solidarity (Atkinson et al. 1986; Roberts and Bengtson 1990; Rossi and Rossi 1990). A second group of studies tries to combine these different dimensions of intergenerational relations, aiming at the construction of family typologies (Bengtson 2001; Giarrusso et al. 2004; 2005; Katz et al. 2005; Van Gaalen and Dykstra 2006; Silverstein et al. 1994; Steinbach 2008). A third group of studies deals with the different perspectives, which parents and children have on their relationship. This research has resulted in the so called ‘intergenerational stake hypotheses’ (Bengtson and Kuypers 1971) and has initiated several subsequent replications until recently (Aquilino 1999; Giarrusso et al. 1995; Trommsdorff and

Schwarz 2007). A fourth and largest group of studies can be characterized by their varied attempts at identifying independent sociostructural, intrafamilial or intergenerational factors that determine intergenerational relationships. Determinants of the degree of emotional closeness, the frequency of contact and the level of exchange are of particular interest (Attias-Donfut 2000; Hank 2007; Kaufman and Uhlenberg 1998; Klaus 2009; Kohli et al. 2005; Lawton et al. 1994; Parrott and Bengtson 1999; Roberts and Bengtson 1990; Rossi and Rossi 1990; Spitze and Logan 1991; Steinbach and Kopp 2008b; Szydlik 1995; 2000). But also, for example, conflict (Szydlik 2008), ambivalence (Pillemer and Suito 2002), and inheritance (Kohli 2004; Lauterbach and Lüscher 1996; Nauck 2009b; Szydlik 1999; 2004; Szydlik and Schupp 2004) are important empirical research subjects. The results of all these studies are in sharp contrast to the popular perception of weakening ties between generations in “postmodern” families. Instead, intergenerational relationships become – despite the changing demographic structure – increasingly important for family members and are obviously one of the major mechanisms of social integration in functionally differentiated societies.

2.2.2 Gender

One structural variable has played an important role over the years and thus will be paid attention at this point, namely gender. Empirical results show consistently that the respective combination of gender across generations structures the relationship considerably, i.e. there is a rank order in the closeness of the relationship from mother-daughter- to mother-son, father-daughter- and father-son-relationship (Kaufman and Uhlenberg 1998; Nauck 2009a; Rossi 1993; Szydlik 1995). Women – especially from the older generation – function as ‘kinkeeper’ (Atkinson et al. 1986; Rossi and Rossi 1990), maintaining the relationships and providing support. Moreover, women are prone to find themselves in a “sandwich”-situation with simultaneous care activities for both the older and the younger generation within the family. However, this phenomenon becomes seldom because of increased healthy aging and extended age differences between generations (Kohli and Künemund 2005a; Künemund 2006).

2.2.3 Life Course

In recent years, research on intergenerational relationships has also adopted a life course perspective. Although cross-sectional data are predominantly used, the interesting research question has been, whether early life stages have an important impact on the intergenerational relationships in later life. It was investigated in this perspective, how parents' early transfers to their young adult children affect the children's propensity in middle age to provide social support to their aging parents (Silverstein et al. 2002) and how life course transitions experienced by each generation affect the quality of relationship between adult children and their parents (Kaufman and Uhlenberg 1998). Especially separation and divorce of parents as an obstacle of later life intergenerational relationships has become an important research issue (Aquilino 2005; Kalmijn 2008; Lin 2008); moreover, the relationship between attachment patterns in early childhood and the exchange of support in later life stages has been risen as an important research issue (Cicirelli 1993; Merz et al. 2008; Schwarz and Trommsdorff 2005).

2.2.4 Cross-national Comparisons

The establishment of cross-nationally and cross-culturally comparative data sets has made it possible to investigate intergenerational relationships in a comparative perspective. Such research programs, predominantly based on cross-sectional data, exist especially for East Asian societies (Hermalin 2002), for Europe (Albertini et al. 2007; Brandt and Szydlik 2008; Haberkern and Szydlik 2008; Hank 2007; Katz et al. 2005), and to some extent for comparisons across continents (Nauck 2009a; 2009b; Nauck and Suckow 2006; Nauck and Yi 2007; Trommsdorff and Nauck 2005). The predominant perspective in cross-national research is the interrelationship between the social-political regime on the one hand and the structure of intergenerational exchange relationships on the other, i.e. the question, whether social-political measures and incentives may deteriorate intergenerational support and solidarity (crowding out) or whether they enable and enhance them (crowding in) (Künemund 2008). Empirical research provides some evidence that economic transfer and care provisions by the welfare state do not edge out intergenerational support – both seem to complement each other

(Armi et al. 2008; Attias-Donfut 2000; Brandt and Szydlik 2008; Künemund and Vogel 2006). Moreover, empirical evidence is provided that social-political regimes and individual involvement in intergenerational support interact strongly (Haber Kern and Szydlik 2008).

2.2.5 Social and Demographic Change

Major demographic trends in the 20th century had a strong impact on the analysis of intergenerational relationships. One emerging research domain is the analysis of intergenerational relationships beyond the parent-child-dyad, namely grandparent-grandchildren-relationships (Hank and Buber 2009; Harper 2005; Hoff 2007; King and Elder 1995; 1997; Mueller and Elder 2003). Increased life-expectancy in welfare societies has not only resulted in increased common life time of parents and children, but also in the increased existence of families with three and even four generations (Hoff 2006; Lauterbach 1995; Lauterbach and Klein 2004). This phenomenon altogether with the decline of horizontal kinship relationships because of reduced fertility was coined as the ‚beanpole-family‘ (Bengtson et al. 1990) and described as the multi-local extended family structure (Bertram 2003; Lauterbach 2004). This development has stimulated the questions, to what extent relationships between generations are interwoven (Friedman et al. 2008) and to what extent grandparent-grandchildren-relationships are comparable to parent-child-relationships (Hoff 2007).

Another major demographic trend is the increased number of immigrants and their aging (Dietzel-Papakyriakou 1993; Nauck 2007). Empirical research has been dedicated to the question, whether intergenerational relationships differ between migrant and native families, between immigrant families of different origin and within different receiving contexts and how these relationships are maintained across national borders (Attias-Donfut and Wolff 2008; Baykara-Krumme 2008a; 2008b; Komter and Schans 2008; Nauck 2001; Nauck and Kohlmann 1998).

3. Status Quo: Data Bases and Access

Meanwhile, several data sets exist which can be used for the analysis of intergenerational relationships. For Germany, these are on the one hand the large-scale data sets like the *German Socio-Economic Panel Study* (GSOEP), the *Generations and Gender Survey* (GGS) and the *Family Survey*, which encompass large age brackets. On the other hand, data-sets from aging research are available, such as the study *Old Age and Autonomy: The Role of Service Systems and Intergenerational Solidarity* (OASIS), the *German Ageing Survey* (DEAS) or the *Survey of Health, Ageing and Retirement in Europe* (SHARE), which mostly concentrate on the population from the 40th year onwards. Additionally, the data-set of the *Panel Analysis of Intimate Relationships and Family Dynamics* (PAIRFAM) will be available soon, which will provide data on the intergenerational relationships of younger respondents (between 15 and 50) with their respective parents. GGS, OASIS and SHARE are cross-national comparative research programs and allow for analyzing the German situation in an international perspective. Other important international studies of intergenerational relations, but without a German sample, are the *Netherlands Kinship Panel Study* (NKPS) (Dykstra 1999; Dykstra et al. 2006) and two studies from the United States: the *Longitudinal Study of Generations* (LSOG) (Mangen et al. 1988; Giarrusso and Zucker 2004) and the *American National Survey of Families and Households* (NSFH) (Sweet and Bumpass 2002). A systematic comparison of the existing data sets on an international level is provided in the appendix; the following brief description concentrates on German data sets and those with German participation.

German Socio-Economic Panel Study (GSOEP). The GSOEP of the German Institute for Economic Research (DIW), which since 1984 collects detailed annual data to measure the stability and change of living conditions in Germany (Frick 2007), has extended its scope since the early 1990ies to some instruments on intergenerational relationships, such as residential distance and emotional closeness to biological parents and to the closest living son or daughter (if the respondent has more than one) (1991, 1996, 2001, 2006). Since 1984, the

amount of financial transfers between generations is captured (exception: 1992 and 1994), including intergenerational donations, inheritance and bequest.

Generations and Gender Survey (GGS). The GGS is the German version of an international research program in 16 countries. It is merged into the 'Generations and Gender Program' (GGP) of the 'United Nations Economic Commission of Europe' (UNECE) (Ruckdeschel et al., 2006). The first two waves were completed in 2005 and 2008. The GGS contains questions regarding residential distance, frequency of contact and emotional closeness to parents and children, filial obligations, and day care of grandchildren. Financial, instrumental and emotional support is captured with a network generator, within which family members can be named.

Family Survey. The Family Survey of the German Youth Institute (Bien and Marbach 2008) includes a three-wave-panel as a subsample but with a lag of six years between the waves (1988, 1994, 2000). Emotional closeness and exchange of financial support is captured with a network generator, within which family and kinship members can be named. For all named individuals, information on relationship quality, residential distance and frequency of contact are available.

Old Age and Autonomy: The Role of Service Systems and Intergenerational Solidarity (OASIS). OASIS is conducted in five countries, including Germany (Tesch-Römer et al. 2000; Lowenstein and Ogg 2003). Data collection took place in 2000 in urban regions only. The disproportional stratified sample starts at the 25 years old and overrepresents individuals of 75+. Intergenerational relationships are measured on the dimensions residential distance, frequency of contact (to parents and all children), emotional closeness, conflict and ambivalence, consensus (degree of similarity on opinions and values) (parents and focus child) and the agreement to filial obligations. Mutual support is captured with financial, emotional, and instrumental help within the last 12 months. Moreover, grandparent-grandchildren-relationships are covered with regard to residential distance, frequency of contact, and support.

German Ageing Survey (DEAS). The German Ageing Survey of the German Centre of Gerontology is a study of the living situation of people 40 and above in Germany. Three waves were completed in 1996, 2002 and 2008 (Kohli and Künemund 2005b; Tesch-Römer et al. 2002; 2006). For all children and for all individuals, with whom the respondent predominantly grew up, and for up to 8 additional network members, the following dimensions of intergenerational relations are captured: residential distance, frequency of contact and emotional closeness. Exchange of support is part of a network generator, within which up to 5 persons may be named, with whom the respondent exchanges financial, instrumental and emotional support. Day care of grandchildren is also captured, as well as inheritance and bequest.

Survey of Health, Ageing and Retirement in Europe (SHARE). SHARE is an international longitudinal research program and comprises 15 countries in Europe (Bösch-Supan and Jürges 2005; Bösch-Supan et al. 2005), with three panel waves in 2004/5, 2006/7, and 2008/9. The first wave captured target persons of 50 years and older, and their household partners. Intergenerational relationships are covered by the dimensions residential distance, frequency of contact and emotional closeness to parents and all children, living outside the respondents household. Received help was captured by questions, from whom material and financial transfers within the last 12 months, and caring, if necessary, was received. Up to three individuals can be named. Day care of grandchildren is also captured.

Panel Analysis of Intimate Relationships and Family Dynamics (PAIRFAM). PAIRFAM is a comprehensive research program about partnership and family development in Germany (Huinink and Feldhaus 2008). It is based on a cohort design, comprising three cohorts of 15-17 , 25-27, and 35-37 years old target persons, in combination with a multi-actor design, including the respective partner, both parents, and children of 8 years and older. Data collection of the first wave takes place in 2008/9, 13 further waves are planned. In the first wave, short versions of instruments on intergenerational relationships are applied (residential distance, frequency of contact and emotional closeness). From the second wave onwards, comprehensive instruments on residential distance, frequency of contact, emotional

closeness, conflict, ambivalence, agreement to filial obligations and material/financial, instrumental and emotional transfers will be used, targeting the relationship to both biological parents and, in case, to step parents. The multi-actor design implies that from the second wave onwards, (step-)parents will provide information on their perspective on the intergenerational relationship towards the target person and its respective partner, and that the partner will provide information on his/her relationship to his/her parents-in-law.

Although surveys including topics of intergenerational relationships have grown considerably during the last decade, there are still obvious data deficits – especially for Germany:

- As the data on intergenerational relationships are in most cases limited to the measurement of selective dimensions of intergenerational solidarity, their internal structure and mutual influences can not be tested.
- Most studies originate in the field of social gerontology with a focus on the elderly, their family support and its relation to institutional caretaking.
- Most studies are highly selective in the choice of the studied intergenerational relationships, i.e. only the relationship to the emotionally and spatially closest child or parent is surveyed, resulting in a positive bias in the scientific description of intergenerational relationships.

For a better understanding of intergenerational relationships in present time society, a life course perspective, covering the development of intergenerational relationships across the entire life span and under varying family settings, including non-biological forms of parent-child-relations, is needed. Only then, valid measurements of intergenerational solidarity, conflict and separation in its various dimensions is obtained and allows then also to infer informed estimates about future developments of intergenerational solidarity potentials and social integration.

4. Future Developments and Recommendations

The diagnosis of these deficits allow for some recommendations for necessary data structures in future research.

- Data on intergenerational relationships should be *obtained simultaneously and complete*, i.e. all dimensions of the well-established model of intergenerational solidarity and its extensions into conflict have to be measured. Only this allows for the investigation of the scientifically and practically important interrelationship between the various dimensions of intergenerational relations.
- Data on intergenerational relationships should be targeted to a *life span perspective*. Intergenerational solidarity in later life stages depends on intergenerational experiences in sensitive life stages, trajectories and alternate options and obligations during the previous life course, and is thus path dependent. The interdependence of generations during the entire life span is one of the most important desiderata in this research domain.
- The study of intergenerational relationships needs *panel designs*. Only panel designs allow for the analysis of the creation and the development of intergenerational relationships in specific stages of the life course. They should be complemented by retrospective information on critical life events, related to intergenerational relationships, in the past biography of the respondents and his/her family members.
- Methodological research is urgently needed with regard to the *measurement intervals* for intergenerational relationships. Since previous research has concentrated on the most stable and most harmonious relationships in later life, this research provides no knowledge for adequate measurement in the case of instable, disruptive or conflictous parent-child-relationships.
- The study of intergenerational relationships should include a *multi-actor-design*, to include the perceptions, evaluations, needs, resources of both sides in an intergenerational relationship, which is, by nature, asymmetric and thus prone to differences between members. Moreover, each individual is (and can statistically be modeled) as an action

context of the other. Comprehensive analyses of multi-level panel data on intergenerational relationships will be a major research agenda in this realm.

- The study of intergenerational relationships should account for *cultural variability and diversification*. Increasing numbers of individuals with a migration background result in an increased variability of values related to filial and parental obligations, of arrangements in intergenerational support and of wealth flows between generations. This requests not only to include specific measurements for migrant- and minority-situations, but also cross-culturally informed adaptations, which still have to be developed and tested.
- The emergence of multi-local, multi-generational family structures asks for special provisions in the data collection, and in most cases for a *multi-method-design*. As the study of intergenerational relationships can not be based on a standard representative survey design, where all respondents are accessed with the same data collection method, it will necessarily use a combination of the various obtainable methods, such as mail survey, CATI, CAPI, CASI, PAPI or CAWI. However, no systematic results are available yet, which allow for the estimation of the respective advantages and disadvantages in this specific research field.
- For the full understanding of the interplay between institutional settings in the respective social context and the specific structure of intergenerational relationships, *cross-national and cross-cultural comparisons* are needed. To achieve this goal, concepts and measurements have to be standardized and tested for linguistic and functional equivalence. These efforts require a specific infrastructure and extended time for development, both of which are typically disregarded in the funding of comparative research programs. Effective international collaboration needs an additional infrastructure, from which standardization and equivalence testing is coordinated.

The study of intergenerational relationships is an emerging and expanding research domain in the social sciences. It is placed at an interface between the micro-social level of interactionist family sociology, the meso-level of network analysis and human ecology, and the macro-level of societal integration and social inequality. Its developmental feature implies a life span

perspective, which asks for and allows for interdisciplinary cooperation, including a large array of disciplines, including developmental psychology, social gerontology, demography, economy, and sociology.

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Appendix: Overview of surveys which include measures of intergenerational relationships

Study	Full Name	Institution	Data Collection	Unit of Observation	Universe	Countries	Migrant Sample	Dimensions of Intergenerational Relations
GSOEP	German Socio-Economic Panel Study	German Institute for Economic Research, Berlin	Since 1984 IGR: 91, 96, 01, 06	Households (n=10.000) Individuals (n=20.000)	18+ Panel	DE	684 Foreigners (1994+)	Distance, Contact, Emotional Closeness, Transfer
Family Survey	German Family Survey	German Youth Institute, Munich	1988/1990 1994 2000	Individuals (n=10.000)	18-55 Mixed Design	DE		Distance, Contact, Emotional Closeness, Satisfaction, Transfer
GGS	Generations and Gender Survey	Federal Institute for Population Research, Wiesbaden	2005 2008 (2011)	Individuals (n=10.000)	18-79 Mixed Design	DE (AU, BE, BG, CZ, EE, FR, GE, HU, IT, JP, LT, NL, NO, RO, RU)	4.000 Turks (in 2006)	Distance, Contact, Satisfaction, Filial Obligations, Transfer
OASIS	Old Age and Autonomy: The Role of Service Systems and Intergenerational Solidarity	The German Centre of Gerontology, Berlin	2000	Individuals (n=1.300)	25+ Cross-sectional	DE (IL, NO, ES, UK)		Distance, Contact, Emotional Closeness, Consensus, Filial Obligations, Transfer
DEAS	German Ageing Survey	The German Centre of Gerontology, Berlin	1996 2002 2008	Individuals (n=5.000)	40+ Mixed Design	DE	586 Foreigners (in 2002, 2008)	Distance, Contact, Emotional Closeness, Transfer
SHARE	Survey of Health, Ageing and Retirement in Europe	Mannheim Research Institute for the Economics of Ageing, Mannheim	2004/5 2006/7 2008/9	Individuals (n=3.000) Partner	50+ Panel	DE (AT, BE, DK, FR, GR, IT, ES, CH, NL/CZ, IE, PL/SI)		Distance, Contact, Emotional Closeness, Transfer
PAIRFAM	Panel Analysis of Intimate Relationships and Family Dynamics	Universities of Bremen, Chemnitz, Mannheim, Munich	2008/9 + 13 waves	Individuals (n=12.000) Partner, Children, Parents	15/25/35 Panel	DE	300 Turks (in 2008)	Distance, Contact, Emotional Closeness, Conflict, Filial Obligations, Transfer

NKPS	Netherlands Kinship Panel Study	Netherlands Interdisciplinary Demographic Institute, The Hague; NL	2002/4 2006/7	Individuals (n=10.000) Partner, Children, Parents, Siblings	18-79 Panel	NL	1.400 Migrants (in 2002, 2006)	Distance, Contact, Relationship Quality, Conflict, Filial Obligations, Transfer
LSOG	Longitudinal Study of Generations	University of Southern California, Los Angeles, USA	1971, 1985, 1988, 1991, 1994, 1997	Families (n=300) Members of four Generations (in 2000)	18+ Panel	US		Distance, Contact, Emotional Closeness, Conflict, Consensus, Filial Obligations, Transfer
NSFH	American National Survey of Families and Households	Center for Demography, University of Wisconsin, USA	1987/8, 1992/4; 2001/2	Individuals (n=13.000) Partner, Children	18+ Panel	US	oversample of Blacks/Puerto Ricans/Mexicans	Distance, Contact, Relationship Quality, Transfer