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The Consequences of the Development of a Beanpole Kin Structure on Exchanges Between Generations

The Case of Spain

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This article analyzes the effects of the number of siblings, their sex composition, and other individualization indicators intertwined with the development of a beanpole-type kin structure on exchanges among generations in Spain. The effects of this development vary depending on the point of view adopted: that of the parents or that of the adult children. Although this development increases the likelihood of not having daughters who continue to act as kin keepers, there are no clear signs of a weakening of intergenerational ties deriving from the development of a beanpole-type kin structure. The biggest threat for the density of intergenerational relationships derives not so much from this development but from the geographical dispersion of generations caused by the lack of professional and employment opportunities for the younger generations.

Keywords: *family solidarity; beanpole kin structure; family networks; family contacts; family support*

The development of demographic transition has brought about a deep change in kin structures. Increased life expectancy makes it more likely for generations to survive for a longer period of time, and a greater number of generations are therefore alive at the same time, although most do not live

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in the same home. Also, this increase in life expectancy, with its different paths and time lags, is associated with a steady decrease in fertility. This evolution has led at some point to the development of a kin structure characterized by an increased number of surviving generations, a shrinking number of siblings, and an even greater shrinking in the number of children. This kind of structure has been described in a vegetarian vein as a “beanpole family structure” (Bengtson, Rosenthal, & Burton, 1990; Treas, 1995) and is characteristic of all countries where the demographic transition has reached its end and even more in European countries where the number of children has decreased far below the replacement level.

This development has generated deep policy concerns, particularly in countries with well-established welfare states where old age provisions—the bulk of welfare state spending—are paid by the contributions made by the working population. The future of the welfare state is seen to be in deep trouble because of this demographic development as the number of pensioners increase while that of payers diminishes but also because of the deep changes in family life that have accompanied the emergence of the beanpole kin structure (European Commission, 2000). Among these family changes, which have been characterized as “individualization” (Beck, 1986; Beck-Gernsheim, 1998), profound changes in gender role definitions in the family and in society can be stressed as well as the loss of stability of marriage on which welfare provisions typically rely (the breadwinner welfare state model [Sainsbury, 1995]), among others. In the light of these structural changes, the question of who will care for the older generation has caused deep concerns, not only for gerontologists who have long been concerned by the issue but also for broader social groups. This question is particularly tricky in the so-called familistic welfare states (Esping-Andersen, 1999), where the family, or to be more accurate, women play an important role in providing welfare services not covered by the state.

But these concerns about who will care for the older generation in the context of these profound changes tend to overlook the fact that relationships among generations, both socially and individually, are inscribed in a historical context. First, the meaning of care for the elderly by family members is subject to a process of redefinition inside the family and in society, and it therefore does not necessarily mean full-time care or cohabitation. Also, intergenerational relationships are not limited to a concrete period of time but are typically pervasive and evolve in form, content, and frequency, as the members of the kin network age and their life circumstances change. Care for the elderly, when necessary, because not all the elderly need care, comes after a long individual history of relationships. Our focus will therefore not be on care for the elderly but on exchanges among generations at different stages during their life course.

Spain belongs to this group of countries and is classified, along with other Southern European countries, as a highly familistic society, as if family life and family solidarity would not also play an important role in other societies not labeled as *familistic*, as family sociologists have systematically rediscovered and stressed (for other European societies: Bien, 1994; Nave-Herz, 2002b; Szydlik, 2000, for Germany; Attias-Donfut, 1995; Bonvalet, Gotman & Grafmeyer, 1999; and Bonvalet, Maison, Le Bras, & Charles, 1993, for France; Bawin-Legros & Jacobs, 1995, for Belgium; Kellerhals, Coenen-Huther, & von Allmen, 1994, for Switzerland). The demographic transition in Spain began with the 20th century and is characterized by a parallel decrease in mortality and fertility, leading population growth to never exceed 1.3% a year and to largely remain under 1%. It concluded during the second half of the 1970s as fertility began to decrease below the replacement level, reaching a minimum of 1.2 children per woman during the second half of the 1990s. This demographic development has given rise to the expansion of beanpole kin structures among younger Spanish families, though its full expansion has yet to be seen in the future when reduced cohorts enter in the middle phase of their family life cycle. Meanwhile, although not as widely spread as in other Western European countries, family changes associated with this development have also taken place during this period (see the table in the appendix for some sociodemographic data). Spain is therefore a good observatory for analyzing the consequences of beanpole kin structure development on exchanges among generations.

Research Issues

This article addresses the issue of how beanpole kin structure development affects exchanges among generations in Spain. Because the beanpole kin structure is characterized by a decrease in the number of children and the kin keeper role played by women, the effects of the number and sex composition of the children must be analyzed to be able to seize the effects of the development of this type of kin structure. However, this structure is also characterized by increased parent life expectancy, and the age and marital status of the parents must therefore also be taken into account. In addition, because the development of this type of kin structure is highly associated with the profound redefinition of female roles in society and in the family, this dimension must also be considered. So our research question can be stated more precisely as the following: How, in the context of a growing number of surviving parents, do the number and sex composition of adult children and the working status of adult daughters affect exchanges among parents and adult children?

Method

Data

This article is based on a survey designed by the author to analyze exchange patterns among generations, applied in Year 2000 to a representative sample of 1,000 households in the Madrid Region. Stratified random sampling was used, and those interviewed were heads of the household or their spouses aged 65 or younger. The sample therefore mainly covers families in early or middle stages of their family life cycle, though it also includes some single-person households and couples without children (in the household or at all). The generational exchanges analyzed are those between the person interviewed and his or her parents, meaning that the point of view of the younger generation is used, making for a marked difference with most gerontological studies based on the older generation's point of view.

The main limitation of this data source is that it does not cover the entire country but only one region. Thus far, the only available survey gathering pertinent information for our purpose and representing the entire country is the 2001 Social Networks II Survey (The International Social Survey Programme, 2001). But although this survey gathers useful data on exchanges among family and other network members, it does not include information on key aspects relevant to our study. Although the Madrid region is not fully representative in all respects of family life in Spain, it is highly relevant for our purpose because it is one of the most developed, dynamic regions in the country, where social and economic change is particularly evident.

Dependent Variables

We will include all dimensions traditionally considered in the field literature (Bengtson & Roberts, 1991; Mangen, Bengtson, & Landry, 1988; Rossi & Rossi, 1990; Szydlik, 2000) as exchanges among generations. We will therefore first consider contacts among generations, making a distinction between personal contacts (How often do you meet and have time together with your mother or father?) and phone contacts (How often do you talk on the telephone with your mother or father?), with six options ranging from *daily* to *fewer than several times a year*. We will then consider financial support, including money transfers or borrowing of money for major expenses (dwelling, car, major home repairs, etc.) during the life course, and money transfers for everyday life in the year prior to the interview. As support with services, we will include help with household tasks, bureaucratic obligations

(with banking, taxes, social security, etc.), house or car repairs, preschool and/or school child care, and getting a job and borrowing major goods (dwelling, car, vacation homes, etc.) for use during the course of one's life. Finally, we have also considered emotional support measured as having conversations about intimate and important aspects of one's personal life.

According to Beaton and Robert's (1991) typology, we consider only the dimensions of associational, functional, and to a certain extent, affectual solidarity, although in this context what these authors call structural solidarity (the type and number of members and geographical distance between them) must be treated as independent variables. So the only dimensions not considered here are consensual and normative solidarity, which in any case are quite problematic to be treated as family solidarity dimensions (Szydlik, 2000). Our interest in this article is then centered on actual or past exchanges but not so much on potential solidarity among generations.

Although exchanges with fathers and mothers were gathered separately, as divorce among the older generations is rare in Spain (only 1.2% of the parents were divorced), we have treated exchanges with mothers as indicators of exchanges with the parents.

A final comment must be made on the time scale. Usually, to deal with time-lag effects, this kind of surveys asks about exchanges that took place during the past 12 months. In our case, the time reference considered was some time during the course of one's life. This strategy was required because family support is very important in some stages of the family life cycle but not in others, as is the case with support for buying a dwelling or preschool child care, two dimensions that are gaining more and more importance among younger generations of families because it has become normal to buy the dwelling before leaving one's parents' home and not stop working during motherhood. Although time lag effects will appear on minor services, it is unlikely for them to occur broadly in the types of support mentioned, particularly if they were important for those interviewed.

Independent Variables

Sibling structure. Given that we analyze the data from the point of view of the interviewed adult children, who may be women or men, we will first analyze the whole sample introducing gender as a dummy variable to isolate its influence, and we will then split the sample to separately analyze interchange among the dyads of son–parents and daughter–parents, making a distinction as to whether there are sisters as a dummy variable and the whole number of siblings as a continuous variable (grouping five or more into one category).

Variables referred to the interviewed person. In this dimension, we will first consider the working status of the interviewed son or daughter treated as a dummy variable (whether he or she works full-time or part-time or does not have paid work). We will then also consider the family situation of the interviewed son or daughter, including the presence of a spouse (married or not) and the presence of children (grandchildren from the point of view of the parents of the person interviewed), both treated as dummy variables. Although one could hypothesize that cohabiting couples have a lower level of integration in the kin structure than married ones do, analyses not shown here prove that there is no significant difference according to the legal bond of the couple. Finally, we will consider the educational level.

Variables referred to the parents of the interviewed person. First, we will consider the geographical distance among generations (the categories considered include living in the same household, in the same building, less than 15 minutes by foot, less than ½ an hour travel time, between ½ and 1 hour time, between 1 and 2 hours, and more than 2 hours). Furthermore, we will consider the age of the surviving parent; when both parents live, we will consider the age of the mother, because as is well known, women act as kin keepers. Only if the surviving parent is the father, we will consider his age. Finally, we will also consider the civil status of the parents as a dummy variable—that is, whether they live as a couple (nearly in all cases, both parents) or alone (widowed, divorced, or single), once again with preference given to the mother's situation.

Analytic Strategy

For the analysis, we will use OLS regression models for personal and telephone contacts and for support in services received from parents, whereas for financial and emotional support, we will use logistic regression models. In the former case, we will use OLS regression models instead of ordered models because, on one hand, there is no difference in the results insofar as the significance level of the variables and, on the other, the beta coefficients we will consider are easier to interpret and compare. We will analyze financial support with the bivariate logistic regression technique (likelihood of receiving support vs. that of not receiving it), because although several types of this support are possible—in marked contrast with support in services—most persons interviewed stated only one, if any.

Results

As can be seen in Table 1, the sex composition of the children affecting the exchanges among generations is easily imaginable, given women's role

as kin keepers. Women reported having more personal and phone contacts with their parents than men do, and their relationships are also more intimate. Women also reported receiving more help in services and financial support from their parents than men did. Therefore, not having daughters will result in a lower density of intergenerational relationships but not necessarily in low levels of exchanges among generations. In fact, bivariate analysis of the frequency of personal contacts shows that 75% of men living less than an hour away from their parents see them at least once a week.

To better seize the effects of the development of a beanpole kin structure on exchanges among generations, it is useful to split the whole sample according to the gender of the respondent and separately analyze the effects of gender and number of siblings on exchanges among the dyads of son-parents and daughter-parents.

Let us begin with the exchanges among adult male children and their parents. As can be seen in Table 2, men without sisters do not have more frequent personal and phone contacts or more intimacy in their relationships with their parents than do men with sisters. Yet they more often receive help in services from their parents than those with sisters, though not more financial support. So men without sisters do not act as functional equivalents of women refusing to take on the role of kin keepers, although they tend to receive more than their counterparts with sisters.

Not only is the sex composition of the adult children is relevant for the density of relationships, but their number is also important. Men with a greater number of siblings have less frequent personal contacts and less intimacy with their parents than do men with lower number of siblings, meaning that it seems that although men do not take on the role of kin keepers, adult male children from smaller families tend to compensate in part for the lack of a larger family by increasing the frequency of personal contacts and intimacy with their parents. Men with a lower number of siblings also tend to get more services, though not more financial help, because they have to compete with fewer siblings for their parents' time and energy.

Let us now consider the exchanges among adult female children and their parents, reflected in Table 3. For women, having sisters or not having sisters has no significant effects on any of the dimensions we have considered. Unlike the case for male adult children, the number of siblings does not affect the frequency of contacts and the intimacy between daughters and their mothers; they are frequent and intense in any event. Contrarily, help in services and financial support is contingent on the number of siblings—the more siblings, the less support.

From the point of view of the adult children, irrespectively of their gender, being born into a smaller family therefore means receiving greater

Table 1
Multivariate Analysis of Exchanges Between
Parents and Adult Children

	Regression Analysis (Beta Coefficients)		Logistic Analysis (Odds ratios)		
	Personal contacts (<i>N</i> = 637)	Phone Contacts (<i>N</i> = 612)	Receives Personal Services from Parents (Child Care, Housework, etc.; <i>N</i> = 647)	Receives Financial Support from Parents (<i>N</i> = 648)	Receives Emotional Support from Parents (<i>N</i> = 648)
Gender: female	.087***	.192***	.110**	1.675**	1.614*
Number of siblings	-.084***	.003	-.163***	.845*	.803*
Paid work	-.015	-.001	.045	1.042	.767
Lives in a couple	-.020	-.040	-.070†	.855	.987
Has at least one child	-.026	.033	.305***	1.475	.814
Education level	.025	.0218***	.132***	1.182*	1.213*
Geographical distance	-.769***	-.101**	-.233***	.942	.924
Age of the parent	.031	-.022	-.168***	.963***	.974*
Parents as a couple	-.028	-.049	-.127**	.713†	.0774
<i>R</i> ²	.630	.085	.209		
Sensitivity <i>Y</i> = 1				62 40	72 10

p* < .05. *p* < .01. ****p* < .001. †*p* < .10.

support in services and also financially in case of women, because there is competition with fewer siblings for their parents' scarce resources. One must also add to this positive effect of the reduction of fertility the well-established fact (Martínez, 2002; Rossi & Rossi, 1990) that large families (where families with less resources are overrepresented) tend to invest less in their offspring and their children's educational achievements and hence their future incomes are lower than those of children from smaller families. Being born into a smaller family therefore means that more is received from parents throughout the life course.

The working status of women does not significantly affect interchange patterns among generations, as can be seen in Table 3. Neither the kin keeper role nor any of the dimensions considered, which are the basics of kin ties (except care for the elderly), is affected by the rejection of the

Table 2
Multivariate Analysis of Exchanges Between Parents and Sons

	Regression Analysis (Beta Coefficients)		Logistic Analysis (Odds Ratios)		
	Personal Contacts (<i>N</i> = 222)	Phone Contacts (<i>N</i> = 216)	Receives Personal Services from Parents (Child Care, Housework, etc.; <i>N</i> = 222)	Receives Financial Support from Parents (<i>N</i> = 223)	Receives Emotional Support from Parents (<i>N</i> = 223)
Has at least one sister	0.048	0.024	-0.145*	0.853	0.843
Number of siblings	-0.111*	-0.001	-0.249***	0.962	0.695†
Paid work	0.096*	0.247***	-0.020	0.925	1.689
Lives in a couple	-0.088	-0.028	-0.233*	0.660	0.430
Has at least one child	-0.046	0.061	0.237**	0.884	0.263**
Education level	-0.001	0.262***	0.070	1.108	1.393†
Geographical distance	-0.708	-0.184**	-0.224***	0.808*	0.952
Age of the parent	0.126*	-0.006	-0.110	0.950**	1.001
Parents live as a couple	-0.132*	-0.093	-0.083	0.817	1.347
<i>R</i> ²	0.612	0.200	0.249		
Sensitivity <i>Y</i> = 1				81%	93%
				48%	30%

p* < .05. *p* < .01. ****p* < .001. †*p* < .10.

traditional housewife role (and the emerging double shift). In fact, if we consider only the child care dimension, help from parents in this dimension (not presented here) is much more frequent and time intensive when daughters have paid work than otherwise (Meil, 2002). So there is no sign that the process of deep gender role redefinition among the younger generation, which has been and still is supported by their parents through investments in education and child care assistance to their daughters, leads to a weakening of intergenerational ties.

The most relevant variable, very powerfully affecting nearly all dimensions of intergenerational interchange, is the geographical distance between parents and their children. This variable alone accounts for 55% of the variance in the personal contacts between adult male children and their parents, and 65% of personal contacts between daughters and their parents, which in this case is the

Table 3
Multivariate Analysis of Exchanges Between Parents and Daughter

	Regression Analysis (Beta Coefficients)		Logistic Analysis (Odds Ratios)		
	Personal Contacts (<i>N</i> = 409)	Phone Contacts (<i>N</i> = 391)	Receives Personal Services from Parents (Child Care, Housework, etc.; <i>N</i> = 419)	Receives Financial Support from Parents (<i>N</i> = 419)	Receives Emotional Support from Parents (<i>N</i> = 420)
Has at least one sister	0.015	-0.014	-0.033	1.065	0.950
Number of siblings	-0.055	0.000	-0.166**	0.826†	0.818
Paid work	-0.034	-0.048	0.073	1.162	0.768
Lives with couple	0.024	0.035	-0.039	1.008	0.783
Has at least one child	0.001	0.025	0.339***	2.364***	1.507
Education level	0.036	0.195***	0.174***	1.284**	1.211*
Geographical distance	-0.801***	-0.087†	-0.224***	1.001	0.897†
Age of the parent	-0.012	-0.054	-0.181**	0.969**	0.967*
Parents live as a couple	0.010	-0.088	-0.053	0.795	1.026
<i>R</i> ²	0.656	0.054	0.211		
Sensitivity <i>Y</i> = 1				78%	97%
				43%	10%

p* < .05. *p* < .01. ****p* < .001. †*p* < .10.

only relevant independent variable. Intimate contact among daughters and their parents is also negatively affected by distance. In the case of the support received in services, this variable accounts for a far lower proportion (10%) because help in services is also highly contingent on the need for help and the capacity to provide it. Even financial help for sons, although not for daughters, is contingent on the geographical distance among generations.

There are also other variables that play some role in the dynamics of exchanges among generations and that are also related to the need for help and the possibility of providing it. Thus, single sons tend to receive more help from parents in services than nonsingle sons of a daughter in the same situation, whereas contacts among generations are not affected by the couple status of the children. Therefore, being single is not associated with a weakening of the intergenerational ties.

The presence of children (grandchildren from the point of view of the parents of the respondent) is associated with more frequent help in services, particularly child care, which is much more frequent in the case of daughters (beta coefficient 0.34) than sons (0.24), who receive help from their parents-in-law. Daughters are also more likely to receive financial support if they have children than if they are childless. Grandchildren act then as a source for an increase in the flow of support from parents to children, mainly to daughters. Yet contacts among generations are not influenced by the presence of children, and therefore childless sons or daughters do not tend to visit or phone their parents less than those with children. The reduction of fertility and the increase in childlessness therefore does not negatively affect the relationships between adult children and their parents.

Last but not least, not only the social situation of the children is relevant to exchanges between generations but also the parents' personal situation. Contacts among generations do not vary according to the age of the parents or whether they live as a couple, though intimate contact with daughters tends to be less frequent when parents become elderly. In contacts between sons and their parents, personal contact seems to be less frequent when parents live alone but increases with the age of the parents. As both phenomena are related and as widowhood is strongly associated with age, both relationships offset each other. In the case of help, the relationships shown in Tables 2 and 3 are not straightforward. As has been noted before, the data we gathered refer not only to current support but also to support some time in the past, and therefore the help reported could have been provided in the past. Therefore, the negative association with age may mean that as age increases, possibilities for providing current support decrease. This has been shown elsewhere in the case of child care (Meil, 2002). But this also can be related to the lower proportion of women in paid work among older generations of daughters, who therefore need less help with child care or housework than younger generations do. In the case of financial support, this can be related to the fact that younger generations of parents are wealthier and have fewer children to help than parents of older generations, and so the likelihood of providing help is greater among younger generations of parents.

Conclusion

The main purpose of this article was to explore the effects of the development of a beanpole kin structure and other closely related significant family changes on exchanges among generations in a familistic Western society, as is the case of Spain. The evaluation of the effects of this development varies

depending on whether one adopts the point of view of parents or of adult children. Unlike most of the gerontologically oriented literature focusing mainly on care for the elderly, this article analyzes social contacts and support provided by parents to adult children.

The development of a beanpole kin structure implies a smaller number of children and a greater likelihood of not having daughters. Although gender roles are changing profoundly, women continue to act as kin keepers, whereas there are no signs that men are taking on this role if they do not have sisters. Therefore, not having a daughter means less frequent contact for parents with their offspring and also less intimate relationships. For parents, having an only child means that the contact with him or her will be more frequent than otherwise, but according to the additive hypothesis (Spitze & Logan, 1996), a greater number of children will bring a higher density of contacts among generations. Therefore, seen from the point of view of the parents, the reduction in the number of children will bring about lower frequency of contacts between generations. From the point of view of the adult children, being born in a smaller family may mean poorer relationships among siblings but also that they will receive more from their parents throughout their life cycle. Children from large families typically have lower educational levels and hence lower income and receive also less support. As family solidarity functions in a "cascade" form (Attias-Donfut, 1995; Bien, 1994; Kellerhals et al., 1994; Meil, 2002; Nave-Herz, 2002a; Szydlik, 2000), children from small families will receive more services and financial support when parents are financially independent and in good health.

Other family changes associated with the development of the beanpole kin structure, such as female paid work, an increase in adult children living as singles, and childlessness, are not associated with a weakening of intergenerational ties. On the contrary, female paid work is positively associated with support in child care by the parents and has no negative effects on contacts. Sons, though not daughters, in single person households receive more support in services than if they live with a spouse, whereas the frequency of contacts is not contingent on the marital status. Although grandchildren act as social mediators among generations and bring about more support in services and financial support (for daughters) from parents, the absence of grandchildren is not associated with lower frequency of contacts.

More than the family structure, the key variable for most dimensions of the relationship is geographical distance among generations. Thus, although having a small family makes it more probable not to have daughters and for there to be a lower density of contact between family members, contacts between generations will still remain frequent if the generations live close together. If they live far away and contacts and some service support are

maintained, as Litwak and Kulis (1985) argue and could also be seen in our case, the density of contacts and support will be low. So if the development of a beanpole kin structure is not associated with an increase in migration incentives and the new generations born in smaller families find professional and job opportunities where they were born, geographical distance among generations will not be great and the frequency of contacts (face to face, but also by phone) will remain high and likewise support among generations. The biggest threat to keeping intergenerational ties strong, rather than the decline in birth rate, is the fall of economic dynamism, which consequently forces the younger generation to move away from their family in search of other opportunities.

The development of a beanpole kin structure in addition to other major family changes associated with this development therefore does not clearly appear to bring about a marked weakening of intergenerational ties, despite complaints of an ever increasing proportion of the elderly who die alone at home.

Appendix Main Sociodemographic Indicators for Spanish Population and Family

Indicator	1980	2002
Crude birth rate (per thousand)	15.3	10.1
Total fertility rate	2.20	1.26
Mean age of women at first child	25.04	29.20
Percentage of live births outside marriage	3.9	26.6
Percentage of first-order live births	42.8	54.2
Crude mortality rate (per thousand)	7.7	8.9
Crude rate of population increase (per thousand)	7.5	1.2
Percentage of population aged 65 years and above	10.8	17.7
Male life expectancy at birth	72.5	75.8
Female life expectancy at birth	78.6	83.5
Crude marriage rate (per thousand)	5.9	5.1
Male mean age at first marriage	25.9	30.6
Female mean age at first marriage	23.5	28.6
Crude divorce rate (per thousand)	0.3	1.0
Divorce per 100 marriages	4.7	18.0
Female employment rate ^a	28.8 ^b	52.0

a. The percentage of women aged 25 to 54 who are employed over all women aged 25 to 54.

b. The first available data refer to 1986.

Source: European Commission, 2006.

Note

1. The proportion of married childless women aged 15 to 49 decreased from 10.7% in 1985 to 9.4% in 1999, according to the fertility surveys done by the official statistics bureau (Instituto Nacional de Estadística).

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