



Multilinks deliverable 4.2

# Demographic change and family obligations

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Demographic change has affected, and continues to affect, all age groups and generations, as well as their interdependencies and mutual relationships. The long term, sweeping demographic trend in Europe and in other parts of the world is population ageing. As pointed out in a Green Paper by the European Commission, population ageing calls for new and enhanced forms of solidarity between the generations (European Commission 2005). This need for solidarity does not only apply to the needs of the elderly and of young, dependent children; the needs for solidarity is also felt by adults who, for example, try to combine paid work with family roles.

At the same time, there are a number of socio-demographic trends that are often perceived as posing a potential threat to intergenerational solidarity (Daatland, Slagsvold & Lima 2009). These trends include increasing divorce rates, rising unmarried cohabitation, and a growing number of births out of wedlock. Within the theoretical framework of the so-called Second Demographic Transition, these trends are interpreted to reflect growing individualism, as opposed to the familialistic altruism supposedly driving the so-called First Demographic Transition (Lesthaeghe 1995; van de Kaa 1987; 2003). If the recent demographic trends are indeed a reflection of people becoming more individualistic and less altruistic, then all sorts of norms of solidarity may be at risk (Daatland, Slagsvold & Lima 2009), including normative family obligations.

At the same time, studies have shown that family members continue to be an important source of informal support to each other (Grundy, 2008). Many parents continue to play a supportive role in the lives of their adult children after they have left the parental home and started families themselves. Conversely, many adult children during their middle or even more advanced ages provide a small or large part of care and assistance to their parents

Although attitudes and values are not completely ignored, most research about family support has addressed actual transfers between generations. However, studying attitudes and values about intergenerational support can give important insights into the rationale behind that behaviour and may also help to explain how feelings of mutual responsibility are distributed within families (Ganong & Coleman, 1999; Ikkink, van Tilburg & Knipscheer, 1999). From a policy perspective, studying personal attitudes towards normative family obligations will give insight into the extent to which policy measures do or do not match expectations in the population. It may give clues about how to devise policy measures that connect to the preferences that people are expressing. Finally, the relationship between attitudes and expectations on the one hand and the actual behaviour on the other hand determines to what extent people will feel satisfied with the actual state of affairs. Therefore, normative family obligations are an important study object.

This summary paper reviews some of the analyses of family obligations that have been carried out within the framework of the EU-FP7 Multilinks project ([www.multilinks-project.eu](http://www.multilinks-project.eu)), as part of work package 4. The aim of that work package is to gain insight in differential feelings of family obligations and to see how they are a function of, among other things, twists and turns in the linked life courses of Europeans in the 21st century. We first give a broad overview of differences in family obligations between European countries. We then continue with more in-depth analyses. To date, the more detailed analyses have been limited to the Netherlands. This country is widely acknowledged to be very individualized and considered ahead in terms of the

second demographic transition. Fertility in the Netherlands continues to dwell below the replacement level since several decades, the age at first birth is very high, the proportion of births out of wedlock is comparatively high, divorce rates are also high and unmarried cohabitation is widely spread (De Beer & Deven, 2000; Sobotka, 2008). In addition, there are two reasons for starting with the Netherlands: (1) the Dutch GGS data were already available at the start of the project and (2) the Dutch data have a multi-actor design, i.e. several people within the family network of the sample persons have been interviewed (see [www.nkps.nl](http://www.nkps.nl)). During a later stage, some of the most salient issues identified below will also be investigated in an international, comparative perspective using GGS data.

We have tackled the following research questions with the Dutch data:

- 1) What preferences do people articulate in the Netherlands with respect to receiving and providing care? To what extent is providing care taken to be the responsibility of family and kin, the private market, and the public authorities? How strong are feelings of family obligations?
- 2) Where do family obligations come from? To what extent do people inherit them from their family of orientation? Is there a family effect and to what extent can it be explained?
- 3) To what extent are feelings of family obligations weakened by divorce? What are the effects of parental divorce on family obligations felt by adult children? And what about the effect of the divorce of an adult child?

## **1. Family obligations in Europe**

Family obligations are culturally prescribed normative expectations which can be defined in terms of duty and *obliged* altruistic feelings based on kinship or moral grounds, on the societal level, or

in terms of reciprocity and affection, on the individual level. On the one hand, general normative expectations exist in society about the duties and responsibilities between family members, independent of individual circumstances. On the other hand, perceived obligations are related to specific relationships and circumstances over the life course. Both personal beliefs and general norms may affect individual conduct, and both are often interrelated (see e.g. Gans & Silverstein, 2006; Ganong & Coleman, 2005; Rossi & Rossi, 1990). De Vries et al. (2009) use the term "kinship norms".

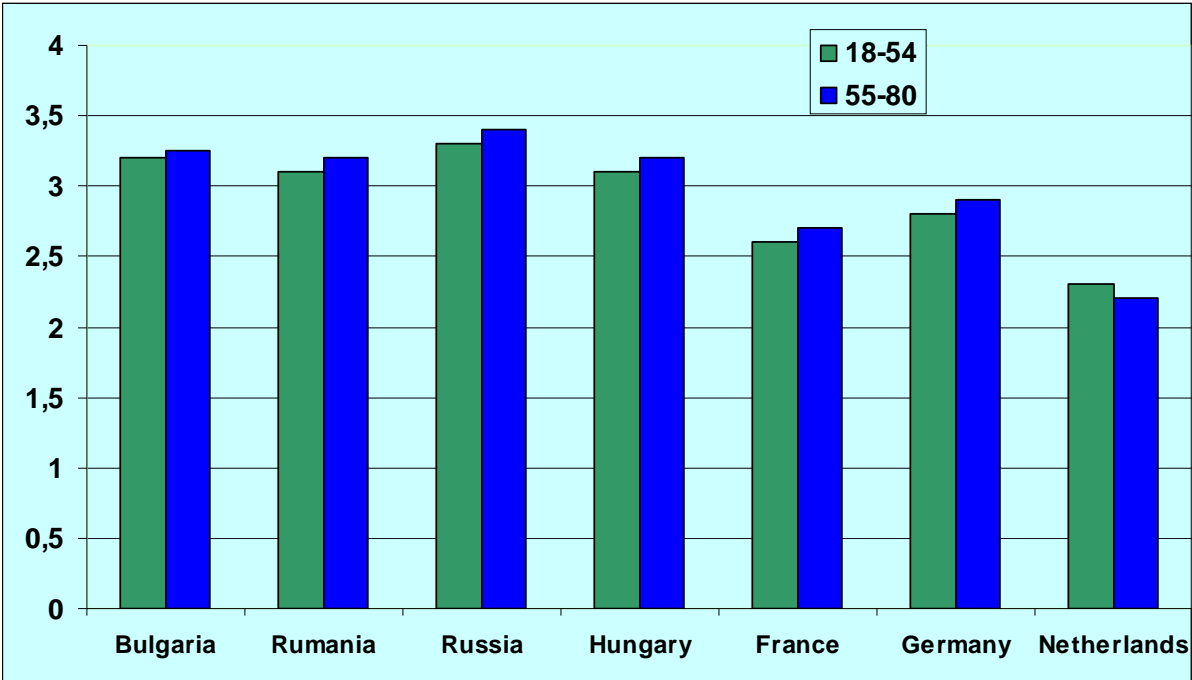
Although empirical results indicate that feelings of obligation remain strong in general, they do not seem to be unconditional. The type of relationship between family members and the context in which these relationships are being evaluated seem to be important indicators in determining the strength of family obligations (Hans et al., 2009; Liefbroer & Mulder, 2006; Rossi & Rossi, 1990).

Rossi and Rossi (1990) distinguish between filial norms (i.e. normative obligations towards parents), parental norms (i.e. normative obligations towards children), and general kinship norms (i.e. normative obligations towards kin in general). The perceived family obligations between parents and adult children have been most widely examined and they are the strongest, followed by feelings of obligation towards siblings, grandparents and –children, and wider (affinal) kin (Rossi & Rossi 1990). However, additional contextual factors play an important part too. Feelings of obligation are found to be stronger when support is reciprocal and legitimate, not too involved and avoiding the creation of a relationship of dependency. Obligations concerning instrumental and financial support therefore seem to be far more conditional than obligations concerning emotional support (Finch & Mason, 1991; Liefbroer & Mulder, 2006; Rossi & Rossi, 1990).

In referring specifically to filial obligations, Finley et al. (1988) noted that they are “a product of the social and structural world in which a person lives” (p. 77). The views individuals

possess regarding support to family members reflect the legal and care systems of their countries. Support for norms of family obligation tends to be lower in generous welfare states (Daatland and Herlofson 2003; Dykstra, 2009).

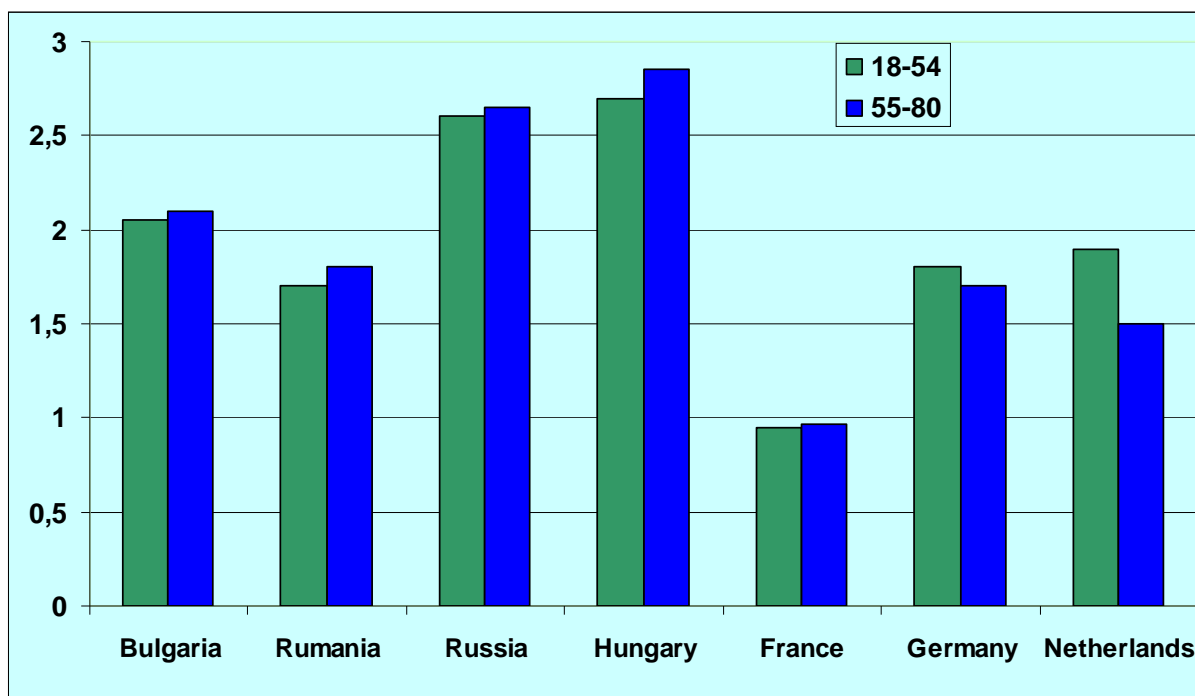
**Figure 1. Agreement with the statement that “Children should take responsibility for caring for their parents when their parents are in need” (0, strongly disagree – 4, strongly agree), GGP-countries**



This pattern is observed in Figures 1 and 2 which show the strength of feelings of filial obligations among younger and older adults’ in different GGP-countries (about the data source, i.e. the GGP-data, see <http://www.unece.org/pau/ggp/>). The measure used in Figure 1 is based on the item: “Children should take responsibility for caring for their parents when their parents are in need”. Inhabitants of East European countries are more likely to endorse that statement. A similar east-west contrast emerges for the item “Children should adjust their working lives to the needs of their parents” (Figure 2). The latter item alludes to greater commitment and sacrifice on

the part of children. Given the more limited public welfare system in East than in West European countries, it should not come as a surprise that Bulgarians, Russians, Rumanians and Hungarians more strongly believe that it is important to provide help to family members in need than do the Dutch, Germans and French (or Norwegians, see Daatland, Slagsvold & Lima 2009).

**Figure 2. Agreement with the statement that “Children should adjust their working lives to the needs of their parents”(0, strongly disagree – 4, strongly agree), GGP-countries**



As Haberkern and Szydlik (2010) contend, policy provisions are not only consistent with the values and norms of a society, but they can also have an effect on them. Their study based on data on state care provision, legal obligations and opinions on family care from 11 western European countries revealed three clusters of countries. The Scandinavian countries and the Netherlands have strong public-care systems, where the state is clearly regarded as being responsible for providing care for ageing family members (see also Daatland, Slagsvold & Lima 2009). The Mediterranean countries and Germany and Austria have family-based care systems,

where only a small proportion of people believe that the state has primary responsibility for older adult care. France and Belgium have arrangements which are in between the public-based and family-based systems. Switzerland does not clearly fit any of the clusters. Though it has extensive state-funded care, the cultural norm is that the family is primarily responsible for older adult care.

Recently, family scholars have criticized the simplicity of the use of unidimensional models in research on intergenerational support. More attention has been given to the tension between existing norms and personal circumstances. The growing complexity of family structures and the ambivalence, i.e. the simultaneous presence of both positive and negative feelings often existing in family relationships have to be taken into account. More recent studies therefore have argued for a multidimensional approach, including both feelings of solidarity and conflict (Connidis & McMulling, Lüscher, 2002; Lüscher & Pillemer, 1998; Parrott & Bengtson, 1999; Pillemer et al., 2007; Van Gaalen & Dykstra, 2006; Wilson et al., 2003).

Intergenerational interdependencies are also formalized in family responsibility laws. Maintenance obligations both upwards and downwards are quite widespread in Europe and, depending on the country, involve differentiated sets of relatives and generational levels.

#### *Four patterns in legal and policy arrangements*

To understand to what degree country-specific institutional frameworks support the desire to be responsible towards one's children and frail old parents and/or support individual autonomy, thereby partially lightening intergenerational dependencies and the gender division of labour, four patterns in legal and policy frameworks have recently been distinguished (Saraceno, 2010):

(a) *Familialism by default*: no publicly provided alternatives to family care and financial support;



(b) *Supported familialism*: policies, usually through financial transfers, support families in keeping up their financial and caring responsibilities;

(c) *Optional familialism*: some kind of option is given between being paid to provide care to a family member and using publicly supported care;

(d) *Defamilialization*: needs are partly answered through public provision (services, basic income) (Saraceno 2010).

This categorization goes beyond the public/private responsibilities dichotomy, showing that public support may both be an incentive for and lighten private, family responsibilities (Saraceno, Keck & Dykstra, 2009). Generous parental leaves support parental care and, in the case of the presence of a father's quota, support the caring role of fathers, thus de-gendering family care while supporting the "familialization" of fathers. Childcare services instead lighten – without fully substituting – parental care and education responsibilities. At-home care, day care or institutional services for the frail old partly substitute family care. The same occurs when payments for care can only be used to hire someone in a formal way. Non-earmarked payments for care support informal family care but also encourage recourse to the often-irregular market, as is happening in some Southern European countries.

#### *Legal and policy arrangements are not neutral*

The packaging of gendered intergenerational obligations varies greatly across countries, as it has varied across time, shaping different contexts in which intergenerational family relationships are played out. Legal norms and social policies are not neutral. They impose dependencies that limit the autonomy of men and women, or on the contrary, support the choice to assume intergenerational obligations. For instance, long parental leaves might strengthen the gendered nature of family care, given the prevalent gender division of care tasks and the differential wages of men and women. They might also further polarize women of different social

classes and income resources because women who opt for extensive leaves tend to have poorer prospects on the labour market. However, generously paid leaves, with a reserved father's quota, support the desire to provide care to family members and at the same time can help de-gender it.

As another example, childcare services are not only a conciliation measure helping parents (mothers) to remain in the labour market. Good quality services are also a resource for children themselves, helping them to widen their relationship with other children and other adults in an aging society, and to overcome the impact of social inequalities on cognitive development. The issue therefore is not long leaves versus services, but rather the balance between the two, together with flexibility in the use of leaves.

With regard to elder care, over-reliance on the family via either supported familialism or familialism by default crystallizes the gender division of labour also in the third age. It may prove inefficient in the middle and long term, since population aging – combined with women's labour market participation, marriage instability, low fertility and childlessness – is creating a caring deficit within families. Furthermore, exclusive or primary reliance on family care is in contrast with the goals of higher women's labour force participation and longer working lives for both men and women.

## **2. Care preferences and family obligations in a highly individualized society**

Care relationships always involve two parties: a care recipient and a care giver. That is why this section addresses people's *preferences* for sources of care as well as a sense of *obligation* towards members of family. Internalized norms guide behavior. Whereas people tend to follow their preferences when it comes to organizing the help they need, it is out of a sense of obligation that they actually provide support to others.

Various actors are at play in care-giving to people in need of help: the informal network, the market and government. In order to determine the most desirable and sustainable interplay between these actors, one needs to shed further light on the preferences people have regarding the division of care between informal and public sources of help. In this section we address the care preferences of the Dutch, a country with well-developed systems of public care and where cultural norms tend to be individualistic rather than familialistic (Kalmijn & Saraceno, 2008). We first focus on the preferences for three sources of care: members of family, friends and the government.

We use data from the most recent Population Policy Acceptance Survey (PPAS) which was carried out in 2002 in the Netherlands (Bundesinstitut für Bevölkerungsforschung 2005) and from the Netherlands Kinship Panel Study (NKPS), which was held between 2002 and 2004 (Dykstra *et al.*, 2005). The statements in Table 1 relate almost exclusively to care for the elderly. A large majority of the population are of the opinion that elderly care is the primary responsibility of the government. The group of people who have different views on this matter is still relatively large. Between 20 and 40 percent of the respondents (the percentages vary, depending on the statement) felt that needy older adults should be able to turn to others for support, such as their children and other members of family.

When asked whether they would prefer friends or family when in need of help, just over a fifth of the respondents said they would prefer friends. This seems to indicate that the exchange of support tends to be a family affair rather than a matter between friends. Note, however, that the younger respondents (under 55) were more inclined to turn to friends than the older respondents (55-plus).

The older respondents tended to agree more with the statement "It's better for older people to live in a home than to be dependent on their children". Having said that, they also felt that "Older people should only go to a home if their families are unable to look after them". This

attitude may well be based on their wish to continue to live independently for as long as possible. When asked what would be their preference if they were no longer able to live independently, no more than two percent said they would want to live in with one of their children (other answer categories were: nursing home, home for the elderly, sheltered housing, community living facilities, living with family or friends). These results indicate that a majority of the Dutch population prefer formal sources of care, and when it comes to informal care, they prefer family to friends. This applies to both the younger and the older generations of men and women.

We next explore the extent to which people subscribe to norms relating to care obligations, that is to say the extent to which people in the Netherlands feel obliged to assist members of their families. Informal care requires not only that people are prepared to receive help, but also that they are prepared to give help. We therefore need to address both the demand side and the supply side. In the following we will examine the extent to which people in the Netherlands feel obliged to support their families. We will again make use of data provided by PPAS 2002 and NKPS 2002-2004. The results are given in Table 2, arranged in five clusters of statements. The clusters are based on the content of the statements and the source of information (PPAS or NKPS).

The first cluster contains general statements about family obligations towards older adults. The emphasis in this cluster is on general cultural values, irrespective of the specific circumstances of the members of family. About one third of the Dutch hold the view that primary responsibility for elderly care lies with close family members. About the same percentage have the opposite view, namely that it is not the primary responsibility of the children to care for their elderly parents. The older respondents were less inclined than the younger respondents to agree with the statement that the "primary responsibility for elderly care lies with close family members".

The second cluster of statements in Table 2 relates to the personal circumstances of adult children, such as whether or not they have a family of their own. About half the respondents – in particular the older respondents – said it was not desirable for adult children to look after their elderly parents if they have young children of their own. This suggests that elderly people want to prevent the younger generation from having to assume too heavy a burden.

The third cluster includes statements about what people would do themselves if their parents were in need of care. The results show that 30 percent of the Dutch would ask their parents to come and live with them if necessary. By far the most who said they would do so, indicated, however, that this would not be a desirable situation. No more than ten percent said they “would like” their elderly parents to come and live with them. The statements in this cluster also show that the older respondents had stronger reservations than the younger respondents in terms of the expectation that adult children should assume a duty to care.

The fourth cluster addressed a general sense of obligation towards family members. The statements differed in terms of the conditionality of care giving. No conditions were set in the first two statements: “always being able to count on family” and “helping each other out in good times and bad”. Just under 80 percent of the respondents agreed with these statements. The third statement related to “providing support when one is troubled”. A smaller percentage of the respondents, about one third, agreed with this statement. As shown in Liefbroer and Mulder (2006), this is a surprising result. One would expect a higher percentage of agreement given that the statement appeals to a need for support. The authors argue that “providing support” could be interpreted as a more concrete commitment than “being able to count on” and “helping each other out”. The last statement in this cluster related the provision of care to the quality of the relationship, which appeared to be an important precondition for some of the respondents. Almost half the respondents felt that family members “should be ready to support one another,

even if they don't like each other". The older respondents were more inclined than the younger respondents to feel that a lack of sympathy should not stand in the way of offering support.

The statements in the fifth cluster relate to a sense of obligation towards parents. The statements differ in terms of the costs incurred (time, money, energy and an intrusion upon one's privacy) in the provision of elderly care. The first statement about visiting parents if one lives nearby is about a situation that involves minimal costs. About half the population of the Netherlands felt that children who live close to their parents should visit them at least once a week. So although most respondents were of the opinion that one should be able to count on one's family, this does not appear to imply that they should visit their parents every week. People seem to attach considerable importance to voluntariness in the relationship they have with their parents. What did the Dutch feel that adult children should do when their parents are ill? About 40 percent were of the opinion that children should look after their sick parents and 20 percent agreed with the statement that children should take unpaid leave to do so. In other words, a majority held the view that looking after one's ill parents should not be done at the expense of one's own financial position or career perspectives. The last statement in this cluster was about a loss of privacy when elderly parents live in with their children. More than ten percent of the respondents felt that parents must be able to live in with them. An overwhelming majority did not feel that children were obliged to have their parents come live with them.

In our view, factors that play a role here are not only an undesirable intrusion upon one's privacy, but also the fact that in the Netherlands ample institutional provisions are available for older adults in need of care. We found gender and age differences for all four statements in this cluster. The older respondents and women were less inclined than the younger respondents and men to feel that children should look after their elderly parents.

In summary, a clear majority of the Dutch felt obliged to look after their families. These feelings were found to be less strong in families where there is a lack of sympathy or when it comes to meeting specific obligations. More than half the population of the Netherlands, for example, felt that you do not need to “be ready to support” a member of family if you do not like the person in question, and that you do not need to visit parents who live close by every week. The sense of obligation was found to be weakest when major sacrifices were involved (an intrusion on one’s privacy or disruption of one’s career, loss of income) or when good alternatives were available. Only a small minority were of the opinion that children should take unpaid leave to look after their sick parents or should have their elderly parents come and live with them. Another finding was that the younger generation had a stronger sense of obligation towards family than the older generation.

If we compare the sense of obligation people have with the care preferences described, it would seem that the degree to which people are prepared to support their families is greater than the degree to which they are prepared to receive such support. Whereas about 40 percent of the Dutch felt that children should care for their ill parents, no less than 80 percent were of the opinion that elderly care is the responsibility of government rather than of the family. And whereas more than 10 percent of the population of the Netherlands saw it as their duty to have elderly parents come live with them, no more than 2 percent felt that this was desirable.

Table 1. *Preferences for sources of support (percentage in agreement)*

	55-		≥55	
	Men	Women	Men	Women
PPAS 2002				
The government is responsible for elderly care	62	70	62	62
It's better for older adults to live in a home than to be dependent on their children	63	60	83	77
If elderly parents need help, they should turn to their children before turning to the government	30	28	31	26
Older adults should only go and live in a home if no-one in their family is able to care for them	22	21	29	24
When I grow older and am no longer able to live in my own home by myself, what I'd like most of all				
would be to ask one of my children to come and live with me	1	1	0	0
When I grow older and am no longer able to live in my own home by myself, what I'd like most of all				
would be to live in with one of my children	1	1	1	1
NKPS 2002-2004				
Care for elderly people who need help is a task for the government rather than for the family	81	81	83	78
Should I need help, I would sooner turn to my friends than to my family	27	25	20	20



Table 2. *Family obligations (percentage in agreement)*

	55-		≥55	
	men	women	men	women
PPAS 2002				
The primary responsibility for elderly care lies with close family members	36	39	35	29
It is the children's duty to look after their parents in old age	34	27	32	21
It's not the responsibility of the children to care for their elderly parents	32	28	38	30
You can hardly expect children to look after their elderly parents in this day and age	47	51	63	64
It's impossible to look after your elderly parents if you have young children of your own	55	52	73	73
If you have young children of your own you don't have to look after your elderly parents as well	37	36	49	52
As soon as my parents need care, I would like to look after them myself	26	28	22	28
I would ask my elderly parents to come and live with me if necessary	34	33	30	24
I would like my elderly parents to come and live with me	9	11	9	9

	55-		≥55	
	men	women	men	women
NKPS 2002-2004				
One should always be able to count on your family	80	78	77	78
Family members must help each other out, in good times and bad	77	76	76	78
If one is troubled, family should be there to provide help	69	67	67	67
Family members should be ready to support one another, even if they don't like each other	45	34	59	52
Children who live close to their parents should visit them at least once a week	49	44	54	51
Children should look after their sick parents	51	41	40	29
Children should take unpaid leave to look after their sick parents	27	26	15	13
In old age, parents must be able to live in with their children	17	10	7	5

### 3. Intergenerational transmission of family obligations

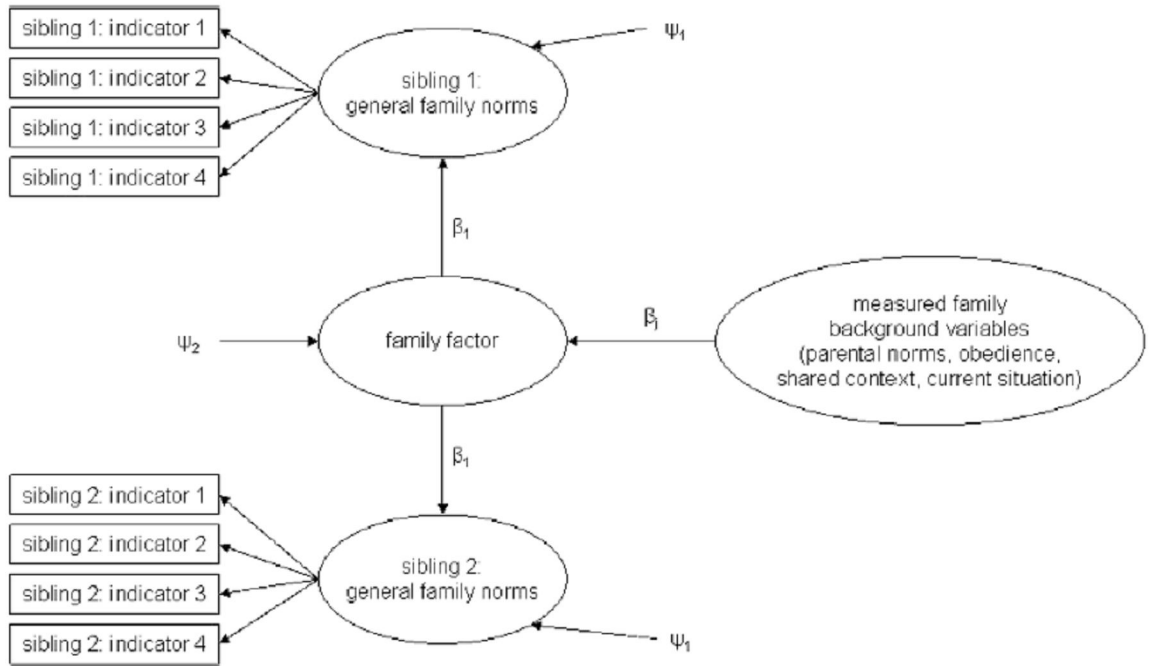
Few studies have analyzed why people have particular feelings of family obligations and where their relevant norms and values come from. Since the family of origin is the primary socialization agent, it seems like a natural place to start. It is an important source of values and norms in general, and its role may be all the more important with respect to kinship values and norms. So the question is: to what extent are attitudes about family obligations affected by the family of origin?

De Vries et al. (2009) have taken advantage of the multi-actor design of the Netherlands Kinship Panel Survey (NKPS, see above) to apply sibling models to assess the total effect of the family of origin on people's feelings of family obligation. Sibling models attribute similarities between siblings both to the shared (genetic and social) parents as well as to the shared environments in which they were raised. The more siblings are like each other, the stronger the "family factor" is estimated to be (see Figure 3). So, sibling models yield estimates of the total effect of both measured and unmeasured characteristics of the family of origin (Hauser, 1988). The NKPS design allows to not only measure the similarity in terms of family obligations between two siblings but also to take the attitudes of the parents as well as other family characteristics into account. In order to take measurement error into account, De Vries et al. (2009) used LISREL to estimate the sibling models. Their results are as follows.

The family factor, estimated by looking at the covariance between the attitudes held by siblings, explains 18% of the total variance in *general* family obligations, 29% of the variance in filial obligations, and 32% of the variance in parental obligations. So the family of origin does explain a substantial part of the differences in normative feelings of family obligations. Yet, some of this family effect may be spurious. Indeed, part of the similarity between siblings may be due

to age similarities, for example, or to the role of the parents' marital status (for example: divorced or not), rather than purely by the fact of growing up in the same family. Indeed, after controlling for a number of background variables (see De Vries et al. 2009, Table 3 for the details), the remaining family effect went down to more modest figures: 12% of the variance of general family obligations and 18% of the variance of parental obligations is still due to the fact of sharing the same family of origin. For filial obligations, the remaining family effect is stronger: 25% of the variance in filial obligations can still be attributed to the family of origin.

**Figure 3. Illustration of sibling model for general family obligations**



Source: copied from De Vries et al. (2009)

The control variable that explains away the largest part of the family effect is the age of the siblings. Siblings are usually much alike in age, and age is strongly related with family obligations. For filial obligations and general family obligations, there is a clear negative tendency with age, with older people expressing weaker feelings - at least: as long as they are not older than

65, because after that age, feelings of general family obligations rise again (see part 4 about divorce and obligations). For (parental) obligations toward children, there is also a negative tendency up to the age of about 45, after which there seems to be a turning point. After that age, feelings of obligations toward children increase again with rising age (De Vries et al. 2009). In part 4 of this paper (about divorce and obligations), we will again report this pattern and suggest interpretations.

There may be two sets of mechanisms relating the family of origin with feelings of family obligations: socialization on the one hand and shared circumstances on the other hand. We first look at the impact of a number of these shared circumstances, i.e. characteristics of the family of origin. Children of larger families have stronger feelings of both filial and general family obligations. The proportion of daughters, on the other hand, has a negative effect on parental obligations: the more daughters in a family, the less emphasis on norms about caring for adult children. Unexpectedly, neither church membership nor urbanization has a significant effect on obligations. Children of highly educated parents have weaker parental as well as general family obligations than children of lower educated parents (De Vries et al. 2009).

Yet, these and other observed characteristics of the family of orientation can only explain a very limited part of the "family factor". In fact, observed family background characteristics can explain only 4 % of the total family effect on general family obligations, 3 % of the family effect on filial obligations, and only 2 % of the family effect on parental obligations. In addition, some of the effects of family background disappear after controlling for the norms of family obligations and for the norm of obedience as expressed by the parents of the sibling pairs that have been analyzed. This holds for the effects of family size and parents' education. So we can conclude that some of the influence of measured family characteristics can be attributed to socialization effects, as indicated by the fact that these characteristics correlate with the norms and attitudes expressed by the parents. For example, that the effect of parents' education

disappears after controlling for their norms and attitudes indicates that the effect of education is due to the fact that higher educated parents have weaker kinship norms and value more the autonomy of children.

## **4. Divorce and family obligations**

There are indications that feelings of solidarity and moral obligation may be at risk in case of relationship breakdown. When divorce and repartnering imply that the role of kinship as a primary source of support weakens, this may undermine the welfare and well-being of those involved. As a consequence, a greater demand may be put on welfare state provisions for help and assistance (Pezzin & Steinberg Schone, 1999). So how are divorce and repartnering in either the parent or the adult child generation related to family obligations? Within the Multilinks project, we have examined family obligations after divorce and repartnering, focusing on the viewpoint of adult children rather than their parents.

### ***Literature review***

#### **Filial obligations**

One of the reasons for expecting reduced feelings of filial obligations after divorce is that parent-child contacts are reported to be strained in many cases. The decline of involvement in the children's lives by the non-residential parent after divorce, most often the father, has been repeatedly documented. Also, often burdened with time and money constraints, divorced parents have been reported to provide less support and attention to their children, even when they are co-resident. Finding a new partner might alleviate some of these constraints but it might also bring new challenges. Research on new partnership formation is very ambiguous. Remarried parents and stepparents generally seem to give and receive less support to and from their adult (step)children than never-divorced parents, although more nuanced results have been found too.

The gender of both the parent and the adult child, and the custody arrangement during childhood may be important factors in determining the support exchanged in later life. Nevertheless, the reduction of parent-child contact and strained relationships in (early) childhood might lead to a lower tendency to help ageing parents later in life, fathers often being more disadvantaged than mothers. Even when a parental divorce occurs after the child has reached adulthood the evidence points in the same direction (see Wijckmans & Van Bavel 2010 for references to the relevant studies).

Still, not all studies found a relationship between parental divorce and adult children's feelings of obligation to support the older generation, nor do all studies agree on a general decline of support exchanged between parents and children following parental divorce. Ganong & Coleman (1999) found that people generally agree with fulfilling filial obligations based on kinship, also to divorced parents, but when these obligations are reformulated into specific tasks there is much less consensus on what should be done (see also the results for the Netherlands presented above). Ongoing contact and closeness after the divorce seem to be important preconditions for feelings of filial obligation later in life.

What happens after divorce in the adult child generation? Divorced children are often found to be less supportive to their parents. In general, they have less resources to provide support to others, and may actually need support themselves, potentially reducing their awareness of the need of their parents (Connidis, 2001; Ganong & Coleman, 1999). Therefore, an adult child's divorce has been associated with weaker feelings of filial obligations. Even so, several studies on the norms and attitudes towards parental care did not find a divorce-effect (Gans & Silverstein, 2006).

## **Parental obligations**

Little is known about how feelings of parental obligations are affected by divorce; research about the consequences of divorce and separation in the adult child generation has focused

mainly on the *actual* support given by parents to adult children. The results are mixed and ambiguous. Parents may be an important source of support in times of crisis. Some studies indeed found that divorced children received similar or even larger amounts of support from their parents compared to still-married adult children (Dykstra, 1997; Sarkisian & Gerstel, 2008). In contrast, other studies determined that divorced adult children perceived receiving less support from their parents and reported higher levels of strain in the relationship than married children (Umberson, 1992).

The gender of the divorcing child and the presence of grandchildren is found to be important in the post-divorce relationship with parents. For example, Kaufman & Uhlenberg (1998) found that a daughter's divorce has a strong negative effect on the relationship with her parents, whereas there was no such effect for a divorced son. The authors refer to the stronger drop in economic status of women, which causes more strain in the daughter-parent relationship, as a possible explanation of this gender effect. Yet, other studies came to very different conclusions, so no firm conclusions can be drawn from the literature yet (Wijckmans & Van Bavel, 2010).

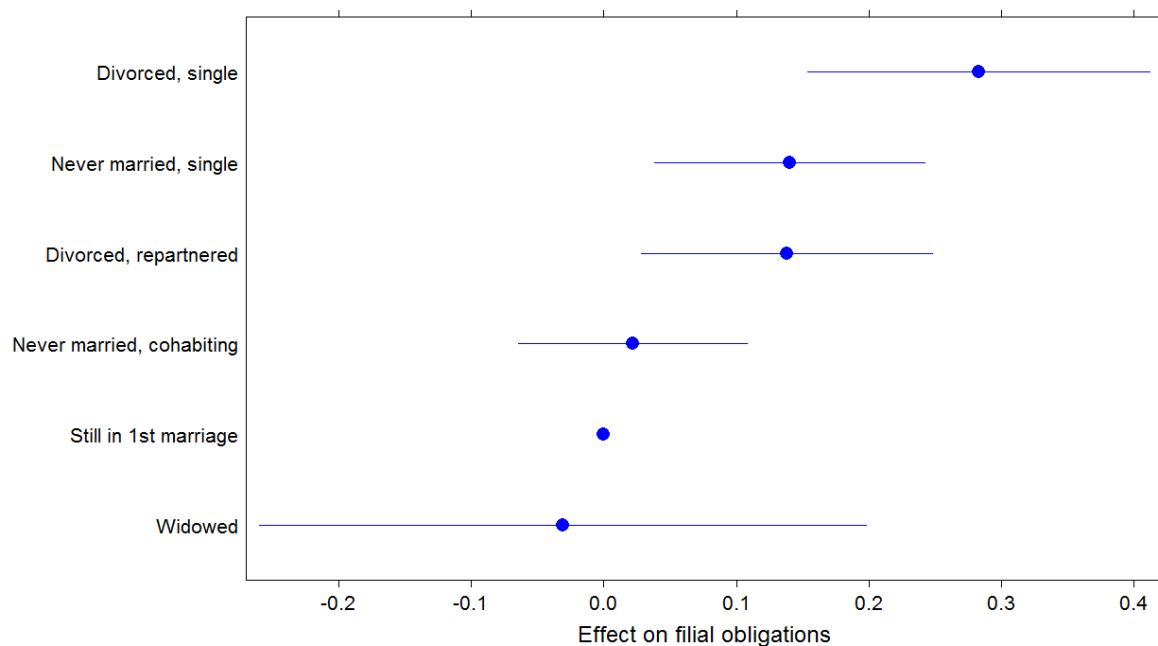
### ***Empirical findings for the Netherlands***

Although the general expectation is that family obligations would be weakened by divorce either in the parental or in the adult child generation, there is no unambiguous and consistent support for that claim in the literature. We have empirically investigated the issue with the Dutch GGS-data. This dataset is also known as the Netherlands' Kinship Panel Study. The NKPS is a large scale survey among more than 8000 individuals, aged 18 to 79 years (Dykstra et. al. 2005). The focus was on the adult child, also called the anchor or simply "the respondent" below. We have selected a subsample containing respondents whose parents have ever been married and at least one of them is still alive and not living in the respondent's household. All the details about the sample used and about the construction of the variables are given in Wijckmans and Van Bavel (2010).



The dependent variables to be explained are three scales of family obligations: general family obligations (e.g. "One should always be able to count on family"), filial obligations ("Children should look after their sick parents"), and parental obligations ("Parents should help their adult children financially if they need it"). Explanatory variables are the respondent's gender, age, education, marital status and partnership history, as well as the number of brothers and sisters. The focus is on how divorce and repartnering are related to the three dimensions of family obligations. In addition, we looked at the effects of divorce and repartnering of the parents of the respondent, controlling for the relationship quality with each parent, and the extent of support exchanged.

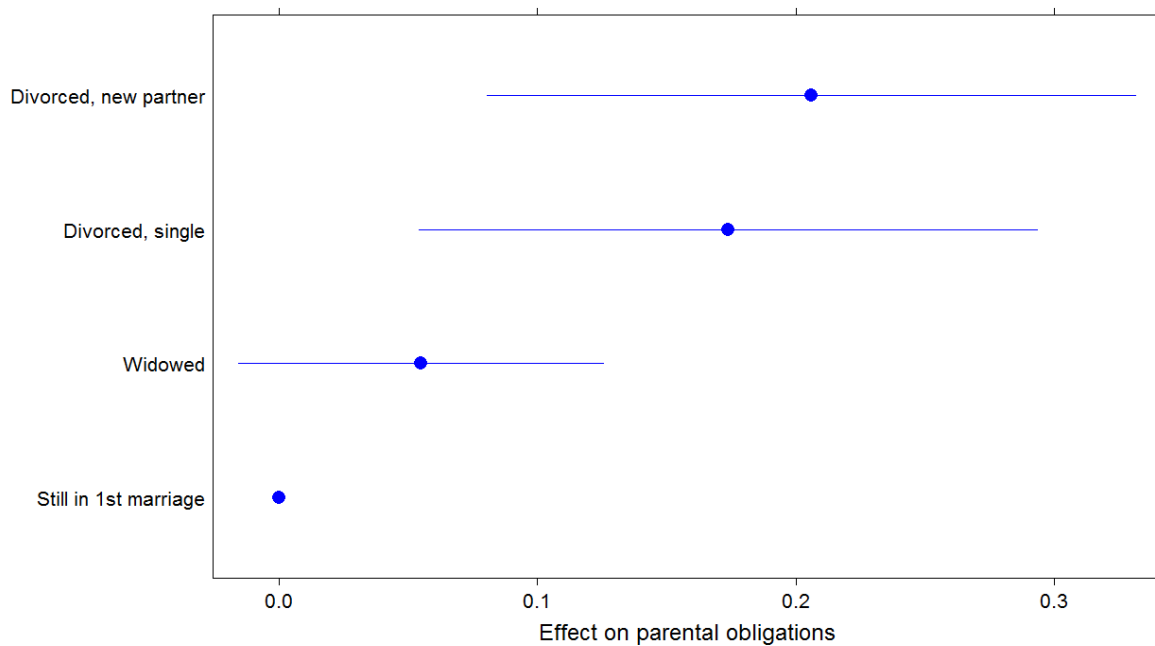
**Figure 4. Effect of adult child's partnership history on filial obligations: difference with the reference group, i.e. still in first marriage\***



\* Lines represent 95% confidence intervals; net effects after controlling for the other variables in the model for filial obligations with mother's marital history (see Wijckmans & Van Bavel 2010, table 3).

The results indicate that both the respondent's and the parental partnership history seemed to be related to the respondent's attitudinal outcome concerning family obligations. But contrary to what is often thought, we did not find a negative but rather a *positive* relationship between divorce and obligations in the Netherlands. More specifically, we found that there is a link between the types of family obligations that are affected (filial or parental) on the one hand, and the generation in which a divorce occurred, on the other hand. That is: the adult child's divorce is positively related to his or her feelings of *filial* obligation (see Figure 4). Divorce by a parent is positively correlated with the respondent's feelings of *parental* obligation (see Figure 5).

**Figure 5. Effect of the partnership history of the parents on attitudes of the adult child towards parental obligations: difference with the reference group, i.e. parents still in first marriage\***



\* Lines represent 95% confidence intervals; net effects after controlling for the other variables in the model for parental obligations with mother's marital history (see Wijckmans & Van Bavel 2010, table 3).

If anything, the association between an adult child's divorce and his or her feelings of *general* family obligations is also positive rather than negative, but the parameters are lower and not statistically significant. There is no consistent association between parental divorce and adult children's general family obligations (Wijckmans & Van Bavel 2010).

There are clear and remarkable gender and age differences. Contrary to general belief, Dutch women were not found to have a stronger sense of duty towards their parents than Dutch men. In fact, the opposite was found to be the case. German and British samples have also revealed a weaker sense of obligation towards parents among women compared with men (Daatland and Herlofson 2003). US research has generally shown that women have stronger support norms than men (Gans and Silverstein 2006; Rossi and Rossi 1990; Stein et al. 1998). We have interpreted the gender differences found as meaning that perhaps women give more realistic answers than men. Women may give less socially desirable answers because they are all too familiar with the practice of caring (as a rule, caring duties are performed more by women than by men). Men, on the other hand, tend to subscribe to the importance of caring for parents in a theoretical sense. They are less inclined than women to accept the consequence, namely that they are the ones who should provide this care. The findings of a longitudinal study by Silverstein, Gans and Yang (2006) suggest that the answers given by women about a sense of filial responsibility may be more valid than the answers given by men. A sense of obligation among daughters at the first moment of measurement appeared to be a good predictor of the care they later gave when their mothers needed support. A sense of filial obligation was not found to play a role in actual support given to mothers by sons when their mothers' health started to deteriorate. No correlation was found between a sense of duty at the first measuring moment and the support given to mothers whose state of health had deteriorated between the first and second moment of measurement.

In general, people aged 18 to 29 years old express the strongest feelings of family obligations. This is sometimes explained as young adults being more 'idealistic' because they are often still far removed from the realities of actually having to care for parents or being in need of support themselves (see e.g. Gans & Silverstein, 2006). It also supports the view that the young are most highly motivated to help their parents as they have had little opportunity to 'pay their parents back' for the investments they made in them.

There are some differences in the overall shape of the relation between age and obligations according to the type of obligation. For both general family obligations and parental obligations there is a U-shaped age-effect, with the youngest and the oldest expressing the strongest feelings of obligation. In contrast, for filial obligations we find a steady decline with age: the oldest age category expresses the weakest feelings of obligation towards parents. A consistent pattern suggested by our results is that the older age groups are less willing to receive informal care than the younger age groups are to give care. We should not exclude the possibility, of course, that the answers given by the younger respondents reflect an overestimation of their actual willingness to provide care. On the whole, young people are still far removed from the need to care for their older members of family. They may therefore have too rosy a picture of what it means to provide informal care and be insufficiently aware of the practical implications of this responsibility.

## **Conclusions**

This paper has synthesized some of the key findings from our research about intergenerational family obligations, carried out within the framework of the EU-FP7 Multilinks project. We looked at the strength of family obligations because (a) they are generally considered important for the well-being of Europeans while (b) they are often portrayed as being in danger as a consequence of recent socio-demographic changes. Indeed, the so-called Second Demographic

Transition involves rising unmarried cohabitation, growing proportions of births out of wedlock, and soaring divorce rates. It is argued that these trends are driven by growing individualism, which may imply that all sorts of solidarity become weaker.

We distinguish between three types of family obligations: filial obligations (i.e. what children ought to do for their parents), parental obligations (i.e. what parents ought to do for their children), and general family obligations (i.e. what people should do for their family in general). Broadly speaking, based on the available data from the Gender and Generations Programme (GGP), we have seen that feelings of parental and filial obligations tend to be weaker in Western (the Netherlands, France, Norway) than in Eastern Europe (Bulgaria, Georgia, Russia and Rumania). More generally, there seems to be a negative correlations between the strength of feelings of family obligations and the generosity of the welfare state. We have looked in detail at the Netherlands, as an example of a highly individualised society with a highly developed welfare state, and where people hold relatively weak feelings of family obligations.

Nevertheless, a clear majority of the Dutch feel obliged to look after family. These feelings appear to be less strong if there is a lack of sympathy between family members or when it comes to meeting specific obligations. Also, obligations were found to be weakest when major sacrifices are involved or when good alternatives for informal support are available. Finally, the younger generation exhibits a stronger sense of obligation towards family than the older generation. It remains to be seen whether this is an age or a cohort effect.

Discussions about the welfare state are dominated by what Wolfe (1989) has called the 'moral hazard', referring to the idea that people are less inclined to provide care to their families if formal provisions are available. Based on the assumption that the provisions of the welfare state are set to replace informal care, policy makers are addressing questions such as whether informal care is becoming less common and how informal care could be promoted. An implicit assumption is that people are not willing to help their families. Our analyses of the Dutch data

have shown that the applicability of this assumption can be called into question: on the whole, the Dutch were found to have a strong sense of obligation when it comes to caring for family members. Yet, our results also show that a shift of attitude is needed with respect to informal care. In our view, we should be addressing the question 'Are people prepared to receive care from family?' rather than the question 'Are people prepared to provide care to family?' Future elderly care in individualistic societies may depend more strongly on the support preferences of those who need care than the willingness of family members to provide care. People should be able to decide themselves how they want to be helped and by whom: the market, government or family.

Where do attitudes toward family obligations come from? After taking age and other background control variables into account, about a quarter of the variance in filial obligations can be attributed to the family of origin. For other types of family obligations, the impact of the "family factor" is more limited. In general, the family effect as estimated here is stronger than has been found in previous studies. Yet, earlier studies relied primarily on the correlation between the attitudes held by parents and (adult) children. We argue that this research design leads to an underestimation of the true family impact since that impact may work through a range of unmeasured variables. The sibling models applied in De Vries et al. (2009), in contrast, enable us to grasp the impact of the unmeasured characteristics of the family of orientation as well.

Socialization effects, as measured by the correlation between the attitudes held by parents and children, and measured shared family characteristics can only explain a modest part of the total family effect, i.e. about 14 % of the overall family effect on general and filial obligations. The socialisation effect explains more the observed family background characteristics, so there is evidence of direct transmission of norms across generations, particularly for filial obligations. The finding that the socialization effect is stronger for filial obligations than for parental or general obligations can be interpreted in terms of the greater interest that parents have to induce these

norms in their children. There is little evidence that the context shared by children while growing up has a direct influence on their attitudes toward family obligations later in life, after taking into account the attitudes held by their parents. For example, one unexpected finding was that church membership has no net impact on family obligations (see De Vries et al 2009, pp. 196-197 for some suggestions for an explanation and for some caveats about the methods used).

It might be expected that divorce leads to weaker feelings of family obligations. Yet, we have shown that this is not the case, at least not in the Netherlands. Rather on the contrary, divorced people in general tend to express stronger feelings of family obligation. Also, having divorced parents seems to correlate positively with family obligations. Furthermore, our analyses revealed that the type of obligation is also tied to the generation in which the divorce occurred: although the respondent's own divorce history is positively related to his or her feelings of both filial and parental obligation, the parents' divorce history seem to be only positively related to the respondent's feelings of parental obligation. In other words, the norms to provide support to parents seem not to be guided by a parental divorce in itself, but rather by the way the parent-child relationship persists or evolves after the divorce, as shown in the effects of the current relationship characteristics. Although living in a higher order union is also positively related to the respondents' feelings of family obligation, the effects are less clear and less statistically significant compared to the effects of divorcees who are living alone.

With regards to the contextual variables, we did find evidence that the relationship quality and the support exchanged between respondents and their parents are positively related to family obligations. This is in line with other research. In other words, feelings of obligation are (partly) conditioned by, or conditioning for, the current parent-child relationship characteristics. This seemed to be especially true for men's filial obligations, and actual support exchange is more strongly related to the respondent's relationship with the father than with the mother. The positive effects of divorce on family obligations persist after controlling for age and gender as

well as for the relationship quality and the actual support exchanged between the respondents and their parent(s).

Other important predictors for feelings of family obligation were gender, age and educational level. Overall, women expressed weaker feelings of obligation than men. This appears contradictory to their actual behaviour but it might be an indication of their more realistic view on caring tasks and the sacrifices they entail. The correlations with age seem to indicate that people often express attitudes in an altruistic manner and that the young are more idealistic in their attitudes concerning family obligations. For example, respondents in the oldest age category, who most likely have adult children themselves, express the weakest feelings of filial obligation. In line with other research we have interpreted these results as being favourable towards the next generation, rather than an unwillingness to care for the previous. Overall, the youngest respondents have the strongest support norms but they are also less likely to actually having to provide support or being in need of support themselves, which might make them underestimate the implications of this responsibility. Finally, support norms are negatively related with the respondents' educational level: the higher one is educated, the weaker the feelings of obligation. It remains to be seen whether this implies that feelings of family obligations will become weaker in the future, as the proportion of highly educated people in the adult population increases. Anyway, the effect of background characteristics like the level of education can explain only a small part of the variance in family obligations. The "family factor", including unobserved characteristics of the family of orientations, has a much bigger effect on differences in feelings of family obligations than can be explained by a common level of education or other observed family characteristics.

In conclusion, the Multilinks investigations of family obligations have yielded a number of unexpected findings so far. There are at least two remarkable contrasts between attitudes and actual behaviour. First, women hold weaker feelings of family obligations, even if in practice they



take on actual care and support task more often than men. Second, divorce tends to enhance feelings of family obligations, even if we know that actual support exchange is often under pressure after marital breakdown. Apart from that, our findings have suggested that so-called individualistic attitudes may manifest itself in a paradoxical way with respect to family obligations, i.e. in a way that has a altruistic touch to it. Indeed, we have found that Dutch people do not, on the one hand, hold very strongly normative attitudes about what people in general ought to do for their family even if they, on the other hand, provide a lot of care and support to their parents, children and other kin. It could be that in an individualized society, one of the stronger norms is that you shall not prescribe to other what they ought to do. Even if you think for yourself that you should provide help if needed. On the one hand, Dutch people do not express strongly normative feelings of family obligation, but on the other hand, they step in to help their own children and their own parents. In this way, individualization may actually be taking a very familialistic turn in practice. In future work, we will find out whether the findings presented in this summary paper can be generalized to other countries, including central and eastern Europe. In the meantime, the usefulness of the concept of individualization might be questioned in this context. A conceptual apparatus that seems to be more useful in grasping differential patterns of intergenerational support at the intersection of cultural attitudes and norms on the one hand and institutional situations and regulations on the other hand seems to be the one suggested by Chiara Saraceno and Wolfgang Keck (2008; Saraceno 2010).

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