



multilinks

The impact of demographic changes on intergenerational solidarity in families

Nienke Moor & Aafke Komter

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Affiliations:

Nienke Moor is a Postdoc researcher at the department of Interdisciplinary Social Science at the University of Utrecht, the Netherlands

Professor A.E. Komter is Head of the Department of Social Science of Utrecht University College, where she occupies a chair ‘Comparative studies of solidarity’.

Addresses:

Nienke Moor, University of Utrecht, Faculty Social Sciences, Department of Interdisciplinary Social Science, P.O. Box 80.140, 3508 TC Utrecht, the Netherlands. E-mail: j.a.moor@uu.nl

Aafke Komter, University College Utrecht, Campusplein 1, P.O.Box 80.145, 3508 TC Utrecht, the Netherlands.

Contact

Address all correspondence to Nienke Moor, University of Utrecht, Faculty Social Sciences, Department of Interdisciplinary Social Science, P.O. Box 80.140, 3508 TC Utrecht, the Netherlands.

E-mail: j.a.moor@uu.nl

Abstract:

This article examines how demographic characteristics relating to fertility, mortality, divorce, and stepfamily formation affect emotional support between parents and children in Europe. We studied emotional support up and down family lineages. For testing our hypotheses we made use of the Generations and Gender Survey Data. Our research findings demonstrate that people with fewer siblings are more likely to emotionally support their parents. Furthermore, we found that the so-called sandwich generation economizes on emotional support given to parents but not on emotional support given to children. We demonstrated that parental divorce has positive consequences for emotional support between mothers and children, and negative or no consequences for emotional support between fathers and children. Stepfamily formation negatively affects emotional support from parents to children.

Keywords: intergenerational solidarity, emotional support, family structure

The impact of family structure and disruption on intergenerational emotional support

1. Introduction and research question

Family ties in Europe are affected by demographic trends associated with parenting and partnering. Billari (2005) claims that these trends can be summarized with a single key word: postponement. He argues that the postponement of partnering and parenting brought with it the trend to a de-standardization of life courses and living arrangements. In this article, we examine to what extent contemporary family structure and composition resulting from demographic changes that have occurred in the past decades, affect emotional support between children and parents in Europe.

We have two reasons for studying emotional support between children and parents instead of other dimensions of intergenerational solidarity. A first reason is that emotional support is strongly related to loneliness, depression and bad health conditions in old age (De Jong Gierveld & Dykstra 2008; Prince et al. 1997; Sorkin et al. 2002). If, as has been suggested by for instance Popenoe (1993) and Glenn (1997), the family is in decline due to demographic changes in the structure of the family, this might result in a decline in the exchange of intergenerational emotional support and lead to more loneliness among elderly parents. Politicians have raised the question to what extent people in contemporary society still care for each other, and social scientists have studied the determinants and consequences of loneliness (De Jong-Gierveld 1998; Dykstra & De Jong-Gierveld 1999; Van Tilburg et al. 1998). Results from a study by Bengtson and Martin (2001) show that emotional closeness between parents and children in Germany and the United States is not much in decline, but more

general evidence about the current state of intergenerational emotional support in Europe is still lacking.

A second reason for studying emotional support is that since Bengtson and his colleagues elaborated six dimensions of family integration into one construct of intergenerational solidarity, the emphasis in research has been on functional solidarity, or the exchange of instrumental support (Bengtson and Roberts 1991). Some studies did investigate the ‘affectional dimension’ of intergenerational solidarity by examining the relationship quality between parents and adult children (Lye 1996; Suito et al. 1996; Parrett and Bengtson 1999; Wilson et al. 2004), but the actual intergenerational emotional support up and down the family lineage was not addressed. In the present study we focus on emotional support that runs from parents to children and the other way around.

We further aim to contribute to the existing literature in two respects. First, we will study intergenerational emotional support in both directions. We argue that emotional support will be provided regardless of age, in contrast to instrumental or financial support. For instance, financial support flowing from elderly people to their adult children is more likely than support flowing the other way around; on the other hand, adult children will be more likely to provide instrumental (functional) support to their parents than the other way around. We will also focus on the so-called sandwich generation, people with both surviving parents and (adult) children (Grundy & Henretta 2006).

Second, we take the influence of cultural and structural characteristics on emotional support into account. According to Neels (2006), cultural and structural changes, such as secularization, educational expansion and an increase in female labor market participation, have been running parallel to trends in partnering, childbearing and parenting, and even have influenced them. Since these characteristics may affect both demographic characteristics associated with family structure, and intergenerational emotional support, it is important to include them as controls. We will include religiosity and family attitudes as cultural characteristics, and educational level and labor market participation as structural characteristics.

Our research question reads: How do demographic characteristics related to family structure and disruption affect emotional support between parents and children?

2. Theory and hypotheses

Despite historical, cultural and socio-economic variation between European countries (e.g. Coleman 2002; Reher 1998), demographic trends in all European countries involve a decrease in fertility and mortality rates, and an increase in divorce and stepfamily formation.

In recent literature on the family two perspectives on the impact of these developments on the family are competing: the ‘family decline’ and the ‘family resilience’ perspective (Amato 2005). The first perspective, for instance adopted by Popenoe (1993) and Glenn (1997), stipulates that as a consequence of the retreat from marriage and the spread of single-parent families people have become increasingly individualistic and preoccupied with their own personal happiness. Children growing up in these families would face a variety of problems, among which the formation and maintenance of relationships. According to the advocates of the family resilience perspective, however, the rise in marital instability is no reason for alarm (e.g. Bengtson et al. 2002; Coontz 1992). In the past many unhappy marriages remained intact because of formal and informal barriers against divorce. ‘Modern’ family structures do not present children with more harmful conditions than the more traditional family structures. Children are able to cope successfully with a variety of family structures, and these new alternatives pose few problems for the next generation.

According to Amato (2005) a full test of hypotheses derived from both perspectives has never been reported in the literature. In this article we aim to contribute to the debate on family decline versus family resilience by focusing not only on the presumed psychological consequences of a changed family structure such as an increased individualism, potentially expressing itself in a decreased willingness to provide emotional support, but also by concentrating on the potential impact of demographic changes in the structure of contemporary families on the exchange of emotional support between generations. We are interested in the question to what extent the mere time and opportunity constraints accompanying new family structures affect intergenerational support, and to what extent the ties between the generations are affected by these new family structures.

2.1 Consequences of the decreasing fertility and mortality rates for emotional support

Decreasing fertility and mortality rates that occur everywhere in Europe may influence the potential number of candidates who receive and give emotional support. First, decreasing fertility rates horizontally affect the potential number of candidates, because people have fewer children than in the past. Second, decreasing mortality rates vertically affect the potential number of candidates. The increase in life expectancy leads to an increase in the number of generations living at the same time. This trend has significant implications for members of all generations, who will share more years of life together than ever before in history (Bengtson & Martin 2001). Together, decreasing fertility and mortality rates caused a shift from a pyramid-formed population structure, with few old persons at the top and many children at the base, towards a more vertical structure, with many older people still living but with fewer children following them, the so-called ‘beanpole’ structure (Bengtson 2001).

We expect that the shift towards a ‘beanpole’ family structure affects emotional support between children and parents. The decrease in the number of siblings may imply a decrease in the number of potential support providers, because children can share responsibilities toward their parents with fewer siblings (Van Gaalen & Dykstra 2006). Although parents with fewer children have to rely on a lower number of potential support providers, it is demonstrated that children of these parents are more likely to visit their parents and provide instrumental support (Wolf et al. 1997; Spitze & Logan 1991). This reasoning can also be applied to emotional support patterns between parents and children. Therefore, we assume that the decrease in the supply of potential support providers does not necessarily lead to a decrease in actual support provision; on the contrary, fewer children may feel a stronger responsibility to offer their parents the emotional support they need, compared with children in larger families where individual responsibility to offer support to parents is ‘watered down’. Therefore, our *decreased supply compensation hypothesis* reads: people with fewer siblings are more likely to emotionally support their parents.

The mere ageing of populations is often supposed to produce a new type of condition for middle-aged cohorts, especially women living in three- or even four-generational families, the so-called ‘sandwich generation’ (Agree, Bissett & Rendall 2003; Brody 1981; Miller 1981). Grundy and Henretta (2006) demonstrated that there is a positive association between helping your parents and

your children, but also found that demands from adult children and elderly parents compete. Moreover, the increase in the number of generations living at the same time implies an increase in the number of potential support recipients. Our *sandwich generation hypothesis* reads: people living in a family with more generations are less likely to emotionally support a) their parents, and b) their children.

2.2 *The impact of the increase in partnership dissolution and changing living arrangements on emotional support*

Other possible consequences of demographic change for emotional support pertain to the increase in partnership dissolution and its consequences for people's living arrangements in Europe. Latten (2004) argues that nowadays people are more often prepared to end an unsatisfactory relationship and live on their own again. A growing number of people do no longer spend their life with one partner, but instead have a series of subsequent stable relationships. As a consequence of repartnering there is also an increase in the merging of families, the so-called patchwork families (Latten 2004). In the case of joint custody, children will grow up in two different families. When new unions are formed between parents and their new partners, children will have a stepmother and / or stepfather who also can play a key-role in their upbringing.

We argue that partnership dissolution and stepfamily formation can influence emotional support between children and parents in three ways. A first possibility is that partnership dissolution and stepfamily formation *weaken* ties between children and parents, as a consequence of diminished contact between children and parents, periods of diminished parenthood, or lack of clear guidelines and divided loyalties. Existing studies reveal that divorce decreases contacts and relationship quality with adult children as well as perceived support, and even has long-lasting effects (Giddens 1992; Beck 1997; Beck & Beck-Gernsheim 1995; Silverstein & Bengtson 1997; Kaufman & Uhlenberg 1998; Shapiro 2003; Tomassini et al. 2004; Daatland 2007; Tomassini et al. 2007). Other research demonstrated that divorce negatively affects bonds between children and parents, because of its

consequences for people's living arrangements (White 1994). Single-parent families are found to show more internalizing and externalizing problem behavior (Coleman & Ganong 1990) and experience more stress due to attachment disruption and periods of diminished parenting (Brody, Neubaum & Forehand 1988). Remarriage and stepfamily formation following partnership dissolution are found to negatively affect parent-child solidarity. Stepfamilies appear to be less cohesive and slightly less effective in communicating (Lutz 1983; Coleman & Ganong 1990). In short, partnership dissolution and stepfamily formation are predominantly considered a weakening force regarding intergenerational emotional support. We assume that ever-divorced parents and their children are less likely to emotionally support each other, despite the probability that they have a higher need for emotional support. The *weakening ties hypothesis* reads: a) ever divorced people and people with a stepfamily are less likely to emotionally support their children, and b) people who experienced a parental divorce are less likely to emotionally support their parents.

We also present an alternative for the weakening ties hypothesis. We argue that in some situations partnership dissolution and stepfamily formation can strengthen emotional support between children and parents. Although most studies report negative outcomes from parental divorce for parent-child relationships (Amato & Booth 1991; Kaufman & Uhlenberg 1998), some studies found that emotional bonds between mothers and children get stronger following a divorce (Cooney et al. 1986; Arditti 1999). This positive outcome of divorce concords with the findings that divorced mothers interact and discuss more frequently with their children than do married mothers (Guttman 1993), and that divorced mothers more often consider their children sources of emotional support (Arditti & Madden-Derdich 1995). We therefore expect that divorce and stepfamily formation require more emotional support between parents and children so that they can help each other cope with new and sometimes difficult situations. The *strengthening ties hypothesis* reads: a) ever divorced people and people with a stepfamily are more likely to emotionally support their children, and b) people who experienced a parental divorce are more likely to emotionally support their parents.

Although positive outcomes of divorce were found for mother-child bonds, this was not the case for father-child bonds. Riggio (2004) even found that divorce resulted in negative outcomes for the quality of father-child relationships and positive outcomes for mother-child relationships. This

concord with the finding of Seltzer (1991) that children for the largest part remain with the mother following a divorce. We therefore propose that parental divorce weakens ties between fathers and children and strengthens ties between mothers and children. Our *gender differentiation hypothesis* reads: parental divorce has negative consequences for emotional support between fathers and children, and positive consequences for emotional support between mothers and children.

The weakening and the strengthening ties hypotheses refer to child-parent bonds following a parental divorce. However, the question remains unanswered how people's own divorce affects their intention to emotionally support their parents. The literature only provides evidence that adult children who experienced a divorce turn to their parents for support (Johnson 1988). But what happens with their own support provision to their parents? In accordance with the family decline perspective, we argue that divorced people and people with stepchildren are more concerned with their own feelings and family situation in comparison with never divorced people and people with a traditional family life and for that reason provide less often emotional support to their parents. We thus formulated the *emotional preoccupation hypothesis*: people who have to cope with difficulties regarding their own household are less likely to emotionally support their parents.

Figure 1 gives a schematic presentation of our hypotheses about the influence of demographic characteristics on emotional support between children and parents.

- *Figure 1 about here* -

2.3 *Cultural and structural characteristics*

According to Neels (2006) cultural characteristics influence people's preferences regarding family life, whereas structural characteristics influence the balance between the costs and benefits of family life.

Regarding the influence of cultural change on family life, Lesthaeghe and Van de Kaa (1986) even speak of a 'second demographic transition' within Europe, in which new generations attach more importance to post-materialistic values as freedom of choice and self-fulfillment. This shift in values is

supposedly inspired by the process of individualization, which embodies the separation of individuals from communal and corporate structures (Dykstra 2004). This implies that people's beliefs and behavior are less controlled by family, church and community. The process of secularization describes the consequences of individualization for the religious domain (Dobbelaere 1999): people's moral values became more detached from churches and religious institutions. The process of secularization had some major consequences regarding people's choices in partnering and parenting. For example, it was found that religious people have more children than non-religious people (Frejka & Westoff 2008) and that people who attend church on a regular base are less likely to end their marriage in a divorce (Clydesdale 1997). Previous literature also suggests that people's religiosity influences their readiness to support family members (Thornton 1989). Religion and family life are strongly related because religion provides moral values that encourage family solidarity and discourage antifamily behavior (D'Antonio et al. 1982; Thornton 1989).

Structural change in Europe embodies trends in educational expansion and the increasing labor market participation of women (Jensen 1995; Brewster & Rindfuss 2000). Existing studies showed that people's structural characteristics have an impact on their choices regarding parenting and partnering. Empirical research demonstrated that more highly educated people were the last to bear children (Rindfuss et al. 1996; Heck et al. 1997). Moreover, it was found that fertility rates are higher among women who are housewives and who did not pursue a career for themselves (Di Giulia et al. 1999). Structural characteristics can also influence family solidarity. For example, it was demonstrated that a higher education results in greater intergenerational separation and less frequent (face-to-face) parent-child contact (Kalmijn 2006; Hank 2007).

We will exclude the possibility of a spurious relationship between demographic characteristics and emotional support between children and parents by taking into account people's cultural and structural characteristics. After all, cultural and structural characteristics can affect both people's choices in parenting and partnering and people's readiness to support their family.

3. Data and operationalization

3.1 *Generations and Gender surveys*

In order to test our hypotheses we make use of the Generations and Gender surveys (GGS), which are part of the Generations and Gender Program (GGP). The primary aim of the GGP is to improve the knowledge-base for policy-making in UNECE countries. The GGS is a panel survey of an 18-79 year-old resident population which is held in a number of European countries and is designed for a face-to-face interview. It aims to survey nationally representative samples of the population. The GGS contains information about the most important societal aspects of demographic choices in contemporary developed societies, focusing on the processes of childbearing, partnership dynamics, home-leaving and retirement. Currently data are available for eight European countries: Bulgaria, France, Georgia, Germany, Hungary, the Netherlands, Russia and Romania. Because of a lack of data specifically pertaining to our research question, we had to exclude Hungary and the Netherlands. Unfortunately our dataset does not (yet) contain a sufficient number of countries to present a multilevel analysis, comparing western and eastern European countries. However, we have no theoretical reasons to expect the impact of family structure and disruption on intergenerational support to differ across European countries.

3.2 *Operationalization*

Emotional support transfers between children and parents are measured by asking respondents whether or not there was any exchange about *anyone's personal experiences and feelings* over the last twelve months¹. If there was any exchange, respondents were asked with whom they did talk: their partner, parents, parents-in-law, children, stepchildren, grandparents, grandchildren, siblings, other relatives or non-relatives. Respondents could mention at most five persons with whom he or she exchanged any

¹ Respondents were also asked whether or not anyone talked to them about *their* personal experiences and feelings. Therefore, we can distinguish between emotional support that is given and emotional support that is received.

personal experiences and feelings. With this information we constructed two dependent dichotomous variables: emotional support given to *at least* one child, and emotional support given to *at least* one parent.

For our measure of the number of potential care givers and receivers we take into account the number of surviving parents, siblings, children and the number of generations within families. Regarding the number of surviving parents, we distinguish between three categories: 1. both biological parents are alive, 2. one biological parent is alive and 3. neither is alive. Regrettably, no information is available about surviving adoptive parents, stepparents or parents-in-law. The number of surviving children is determined by adding the number of children within the household (biological, adoptive, foster and stepchild) with the number of non-resident children and the number of non-resident stepchildren. We measure the number of generations alive by counting the number of generations above and below the generation of the respondent. Because we have no information about the number of surviving great-grandparents, our data may be a little distorted.

Divorce and stepfamily formation are measured with three variables: own divorce, parental divorce and having stepchildren. Respondents provided information about their partnership history. For each past partnership the respondent was asked whether or not this partnership ended by divorce. With this information, we constructed a variable measuring whether or not the respondent *ever* experienced a divorce, independent of their current marital status. 'Parental divorce' is a dichotomous variable in which respondents with divorced parents form the reference category. Stepfamily formation is measured by taking into account whether or not the respondent has stepchildren.

Regarding value orientations and attitudes we take into account people's family values and religiosity. People's opinions about caring for elderly and helping children were measured by constructing two scales on the basis of several statements on which respondents agreed or disagreed on a five-point scale (strongly disagree – strongly agree). Because information about people's church membership and church attendance was lacking, we measured people's religiosity by the importance they attach to religious ceremonies. A five-point agreement scale was constructed on the basis of three statements regarding religious ceremonies. The table in appendix A gives more specific information about the construction of the three scales.

People's educational level and occupation are the structural characteristics we include in our research. Regarding educational level, we coded country-specific scores to the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED). We distinguish between lower educated people (ISCED levels 0, 1, 2), middle-educated people (ISCED levels 3 and 4) and higher educated people (ISCED levels 5 and 6). Respondents were also asked questions about their present work and daily activities. On the basis of this information we constructed a dummy-variable with five categories: 1. fulltime employed, 2. part-time employed, 3. retired, 4. homemaker and 5. other.

For the variable educational level, with 4,6% of missing values, we created a binary indicator variable that is coded as 1 when the value is missing and 0 when the value is present. Subsequently, the people with missing values are assigned the mean for the specific variable. For the other variables with less than 2,5 % missing values we applied a listwise deletion. Table 1 presents the descriptives of the variables used in our analyses per country. Here we see that a substantial percentage of the respondents give emotional support to their parents and children. Russians most often give emotional support to their children (20.2%) and the French most often give emotional support to their parents (15.9%). People from Germany and Romania least often give emotional support to both their parents and children. On the basis of table 1 we can conclude that there is a substantial exchange of emotional support between parents and children in Bulgaria, Russia, Georgia and France, while being somewhat less strong in Germany and Romania, and that they run in both directions.

- Table 1 about here -

4. Results

In order to test our hypotheses we perform two logistic regression analyses. In the first analysis we study emotional support transfers from parents to their children and in the second analysis we study emotional support transfers from adult children to their parents. In our first analysis we include people with at least one child, either biological children or adoptive children (N = 48.273). In our second

analysis we include people with at least one surviving parent (N = 39.387). To take into account people's common descent we decided to include dummy-variables for the six countries.

4.1 Testing the relationship between demographic characteristics and emotional support transfers between parents and children

Now that we know from table 1 that emotional support transfers between children and parents are relatively strong, we will examine how and to what extent demographic characteristics affect these transfers. In table 2, the results of two logistic regression analyses on emotional support exchange between children and parents are presented. In model 1, we investigate the direct relationship between demographic characteristics and emotional support transfers between children and parents. In model 2 and 3 we respectively add cultural and structural characteristics to our analysis. In all models we control for people's age and gender, which are strongly intertwined with other individual characteristics. We see that older people are more likely to emotionally support their children but this effect appears to be curvilinear. Younger people are more likely to emotionally support their parents. Women are more likely to give emotional support to both their parents and their children than are men. To control for co-residence we take into account whether or not parents have resident children² (first analysis) and whether or not adult children and their parent(s) live in the same household (second analysis). Parents with children in their household are more likely to emotionally support their children, and adult children who live together with their parents are more likely to emotionally support their parents.

Models 1a and 1b show that demographic characteristics explain around 16% and 9% of emotional support given to respectively children and parents. Although these percentages are substantial, we can conclude that there are other - maybe more important - predictors of emotional support given to children and parents. We see that demographic characteristics are more important in explaining emotional support given from parents to children than the other way around.

² Because we do not know which child is being supported by the respondent, it is not possible for us to take into account information about actual co-residence with the support receiver.

- Table 2 about here -

4.1.1 Support demand and supply

In the case of emotional support given from parents to children, we do not find support for the sandwich generation hypothesis. In model 1a one can see that there is no significant influence of the number of surviving parents on emotional support given to children. This finding does not support the assumption that people with both parents and children, the so-called sandwich generation, have to divide their attention between two generations. Against our expectation, we see that people in families with more generations³ are more likely to emotionally support their children. Apparently, having a large family positively affects emotional support exchange. In the case of emotional support given from adult children to parents, model 1b provides some support for the decreased supply compensation hypothesis and the sandwich generation hypothesis. Our findings indicate that people with two or more siblings are less likely to emotionally support their parents than are people without siblings. This supports our expectation that people with more siblings can divide parental care among their brothers and sisters. Furthermore, people with two or more children are less likely to give emotional support to their parents than people without children. Apparently, parents, and not children, receive less attention when people have to divide their attention between two generations. However, apart from the effect of having children, there is no effect of the number of generations within families.

4.1.2 Divorce and stepfamily formation

In model 1a we see that recently divorced people are more likely to emotionally support their children than people who never divorced. However, people who divorced more than fifteen years ago are as likely to emotionally support their children as are never divorced people. These findings support the strengthening ties hypothesis. Apparently, parents are more likely to offer emotional support to their

³ Although the number of generations strongly correlates with the number of parents, the number of children and especially age, our results do not substantially change when we exclude the number of generations from the analyses.

children just after their divorce. Furthermore, model 1a demonstrates that people with stepchildren are less likely to emotionally support their own children compared with people without stepchildren. This finding supports the weakening ties hypothesis: stepfamily formation weakens ties between parents and their own children.

Model 1b provides support for the strengthening ties hypothesis and contradicts the weakening ties hypothesis. We find that people who experienced a parental divorce are more likely to emotionally support their parents. This supports the idea that children and parents help each other cope with new and sometimes difficult situations.

Furthermore, the results presented in model 1b contradict the emotional preoccupation hypothesis which assumed that people who have to cope with difficulties regarding their own household are less likely to emotionally support their parents. One can see that a recent divorce positively affects emotional support transfers from children to parents. Apparently, having difficulties in one's own household strengthens rather than weakens emotional ties between adult children and their parents. However, stepfamily formation does not affect emotional support transfers from children to parents. People who have stepchildren are as likely to emotionally support their parents as are people who do not have stepchildren.

- Table 3 about here -

We specified our hypotheses by arguing that divorce has negative consequences for emotional support transfers between fathers and children, whereas emotional support transfers between mothers and children are positively affected. We tested our gender differentiation hypothesis in table 3 where we added the gender interaction to models 3a and 3b from table 2. Regarding emotional support transfers from parents to children, we find that divorce has a different outcome for mothers and fathers. Our results demonstrate that mothers who experienced a divorce are more likely to emotionally support their sons. This, however, is not the case for emotional support given from mothers to daughters. A possible explanation is that mothers and daughters discuss their personal feelings and problems with each other, regardless of the familial situation. Divorced fathers are as likely to emotionally support

their children as are never divorced fathers. When we focus on emotional support transfers from children to parents, we find support for the gender differentiation hypothesis. Parental divorce positively affects emotional support transfers from children to mothers, whereas it negatively affects emotional support transfers from children to fathers. When we control for co-residence these effects are smaller, but still present.

4.1.3 The role of value orientations and structural characteristics

In model 2a and 2b we add to model 1 people's value orientations and attitudes. People who are more positive about helping children and helping elderly are more likely to emotionally support their children and parents. Against our expectation, the importance people attach to religious ceremony does not affect emotional support transfers between children and parents. In both logistic regression analyses, the Nagelkerke R^2 in model 1 and 2 is almost identical. This implies that adding cultural characteristics to our model does not significantly contribute to the explanation of emotional solidarity between children and parents. When we take into account cultural characteristics, the relationship between demographic characteristics and emotional support remains unchanged.

People's structural characteristics are included in models 3a and 3b. Our research findings show that people who work part-time are as likely to emotionally support their children and parents as are people who work fulltime. Moreover, we find that homemakers and retired people are less likely to emotionally support their children, compared with people who work fulltime. These findings indicate that the availability of time is not so important in giving emotional support. Models 3a and 3b further show that more highly educated people are more likely to give emotional support to their children and parents. This does not correspond with findings from earlier studies that more highly educated people are less family-oriented (Kalmijn, 2006). People's structural characteristics to some extent affect the relationship between demographic characteristics and emotional support given to the parents. We see that the negative consequences of the number of siblings and children on emotional support given to the parents diminish after controlling for economic activity and educational level, but the effects remain highly significant. We can conclude that cultural and structural characteristics cannot be held responsible for the relationship between demographic characteristics and emotional support.

5. Conclusion and discussion

The aim of our study was to explain if, and to what extent demographic characteristics relating to fertility, mortality, divorce and stepfamily formation affect emotional support between parents and children in Europe. We contributed to the debate on family decline versus family resilience by testing hypotheses about the impact of family composition and family disruption on emotional support. In contrast to previous literature, we not only focused on the psychological consequences of demographic change, but also on consequences that relate to time and opportunity constraints. We studied emotional support transfers up and down family lineages.

First, we focused on the consequences of decreasing fertility and mortality rates for the potential number of candidates for receiving and giving emotional support. Following Bengtson (2001), we argued that families nowadays have more vertical ties and fewer horizontal ties. The decrease in the number of horizontal ties implies a decrease in the number of potential care givers, whereas the increase in the number of vertical ties implies an increase in the number of potential care receivers. In support with the family resilience perspective, we found that people with fewer siblings are more likely to emotionally support their parents. Apparently, people without siblings or with few siblings compensate for the low level of support supply that is available to their parents. Our research findings offer little support for the family decline perspective. People in families with more generations are more instead of less likely to emotionally support their children. However, we do find that people with children less often offer emotional support to their parents. Apparently, the so-called sandwich generation economizes on emotional support given to parents, but not on emotional support given to children.

Second, we examined the consequences of family disruption for emotional support transfers between parents and children. Most existing research evidence indicates that divorce and stepfamily formation have negative outcomes for ties between children and parents, and negatively affect support transfers between them. However, we argued that divorce and stepfamily formation also can have positive outcomes for support transfers, especially in the case of *emotional* support transfers. Our finding that people with stepchildren are less inclined to emotionally support their children offers

some support for the family decline perspective. We also found that people who experienced a parental divorce are less inclined to emotionally support their father. However, in general our data offer more support for the family resilience perspective. People who experienced a parental divorce are more likely to emotionally support their mother, and recently divorced mothers are more likely to emotionally support their sons. Also in contrast with the family decline perspective, we do not find any support for the idea that people who are emotionally preoccupied with their own household situation are less likely to emotionally support their parents. On the contrary, people who recently faced a divorce, and can therefore be assumed to be emotionally pre-occupied, are more likely to give emotional support to their parents. A possible explanation for this unexpected finding is reciprocity: adult children who have to cope with difficulties regarding their own household situation turn to their parents for emotional support, and for that reason return their favors in a later stage in life. Existing studies already demonstrated that adult children who experience a divorce turn to their parents for support (Johnson 1988). Future research should focus more on the role of reciprocity in explaining the positive outcomes of divorce.

On the basis of our findings, we can conclude that there is no need for moral panic about the state of emotional support between parents and children. Depending on the country, ten to twenty percent of the people gave emotional support to at least one child in the last twelve months. For emotional support given to parents this is six to sixteen percent. Moreover, our findings demonstrate that parents and children are inclined to emotionally support each other when they face difficulties or have to cope with a difficult or a new situation, such as a divorce. However, we want to remark that the focus on emotional support is not necessarily positive in every single situation. For example, one could doubt whether it is wise for children to take on the responsibility for emotionally supporting their mother following a parental divorce. Nonetheless, our findings indicate that parents and children emotionally support each other in difficult times.

Because emotional support is strongly related with loneliness and depression in old age, our research findings have implications for parents in later life. A consequence of decreasing fertility rates is that elderly parents have fewer children who can provide them with emotional support. However, our research findings indicate that children of parents with fewer children are more likely to provide

emotional support. Because of an increase in life expectancy, members of different generations will share more years of their lives together. This may cause a problem, because our findings suggest that people are less likely to emotionally support their parents when they have children of their own. Because of the postponement of childbearing, elderly parents in the future will be more likely to have young grandchildren. Furthermore, divorce can have a large impact on loneliness in old age. Our findings clearly indicate that divorced men are less likely to receive emotional support from their children.

Finally, we want to offer some suggestions for future research. A disadvantage of this study is that we had no personal information about the children who received emotional support from their parents. The Gender and Generations Survey only provides information about whether or not the respondent emotionally supported a child in the last twelve months, not about which child received support. For that reason, we could not link personal information from the respondents to personal information from their children. Future research should take into account information about the children who received emotional support, for example information about their age, their gender, geographical proximity to the parents, their household situation, and the age of the child at time of parental divorce.

Moreover, in this study we had no information about the amount of emotional support given to parents or children. We only know whether or not the respondent emotionally supported at least one child or at least one parent in the last twelve months. The question arises whether we would have found different outcomes if we had studied the actual amount of emotional support. It is possible for example, that divorce does not influence the likelihood of supporting a child, but does affect the amount of support given to a child. Future research should fill this gap.

Although we did not perform a longitudinal analysis and only made cross-sectional comparisons, our data allow for some tentative generalizations concerning future consequences of demographic changes. We would like to conclude that in all likelihood decreasing fertility and mortality rates will only have a limited effect on emotional support exchange between parents and children. As far as the consequences of divorce are concerned, our results in general do not give rise to severe concerns about future emotional support exchanges between generations. However, an

important exception is our finding that after a parental divorce adult children are less inclined to emotionally support their father.

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Table 1: Descriptives by country

	<i>Bulgaria</i> (<i>N = 11.842</i>)		<i>Russia</i> (<i>N = 10.261</i>)		<i>Georgia</i> (<i>N = 9.858</i>)		<i>Germany</i> (<i>N = 9.120</i>)		<i>France</i> (<i>N = 9.318</i>)		<i>Romania</i> (<i>N=11.760</i>)	
	Mean	Stdv	Mean	Stdv	Mean	Stdv	Mean	Stdv	Mean	Stdv	Mean	Stdv
<i>Individual characteristics</i>												
emotional support to child (0-1)	0.137	0.344	0.202	0.402	0.145	0.352	0.090	0.286	0.108	0.311	0.101	0.302
emotional support to parent (0-1)	0.143	0.350	0.140	0.347	0.121	0.326	0.065	0.247	0.159	0.366	0.063	0.243
age (17-85)	42.944	16.368	46.486	16.752	45.069	16.712	47.355	16.325	47.656	16.053	48.963	16.234
women (0-1)	0.548	0.498	0.627	0.484	0.559	0.497	0.540	0.498	0.567	0.496	0.501	0.500
siblings (0-29)	1.369	1.281	1.576	1.500	1.946	1.495	1.704	1.649	2.554	2.213	2.036	1.794
generations (2-6)	3.366	0.701	3.446	0.738	3.321	0.744	3.136	0.733	3.326	0.731	3.324	0.739
parent(s) (0-1)	0.707	0.455	0.578	0.494	0.641	0.480	0.643	0.479	0.673	0.469	0.561	0.496
children (0-14)	1.407	1.113	1.588	1.151	1.727	1.355	1.422	1.297	1.795	1.527	1.638	1.402
ever divorced (0-1)	0.057	0.231	0.182	0.386	0.020	0.140	0.093	0.291	0.122	0.327	0.071	0.257
stepchild (0-1)	0.024	0.152	0.089	0.284	0.012	0.109	0.037	0.188	0.064	0.245	0.032	0.175
parental divorce (0-1)	0.083	0.276	0.142	0.349	0.034	0.182	0.066	0.248	0.142	0.349	0.184	0.387
opinion about helping children (1-5)	3.635	0.726	3.688	0.670	4.128	0.560	3.524	0.702	3.643	0.894	3.706	0.678
opinion about caring for elderly (1-5)	3.803	0.552	3.956	0.537	4.225	0.510	3.347	0.716	3.087	0.901	3.689	0.541
importance of religious ceremony (0-4)	2.827	0.851	2.805	0.818	3.533	0.631	2.312	1.217	2.475	1.347	3.738	0.467
activity												
working fulltime (0-1)	0.460	0.498	0.463	0.499	0.295	0.456	0.390	0.488	0.452	0.498	0.414	0.493
working parttime (0-1)	0.031	0.173	0.021	0.142	0.120	0.325	0.120	0.325	0.089	0.285	0.049	0.215
retired (0-1)	0.224	0.417	0.275	0.447	0.176	0.381	0.242	0.429	0.247	0.431	0.371	0.483
homemaker (0-1)	0.011	0.105	0.044	0.205	0.144	0.351	0.079	0.270	0.059	0.235	0.079	0.270
educational level (1-3)	1.902	0.694	2.068	0.690	2.143	0.627	2.140	0.617	1.948	0.770	1.691	0.639

Source: Data from the Generations and Gender program (GGP)

Table 2: Logistic regression analysis on emotional support given to parents and children by demographic, ideological and structural characteristics

	<i>Emotional support given to children (N = 48.273)</i>						<i>Emotional support given to parents (N = 39.387)</i>					
	<i>Model 1a</i>		<i>Model 2a</i>		<i>Model 3a</i>		<i>Model 1b</i>		<i>Model 2b</i>		<i>Model 3b</i>	
	b	SE	b	SE	b	SE	b	SE	b	SE	b	SE
<i>Demographic characteristics</i>												
age	0.324***	0.009	0.323***	0.009	0.313***	0.009	-0.018***	0.002	-0.018***	0.002	-0.022***	0.002
age ²	-0.003***	0.000	-0.003***	0.000	-0.003***	0.000						
woman	0.831***	0.028	0.832***	0.028	0.868***	0.029	0.567***	0.029	0.569***	0.029	0.549***	0.030
number of siblings												
no siblings (ref.)												
one sibling							-0.005	0.041	-0.005	0.041	0.006	0.041
two siblings							-0.166***	0.046	-0.168***	0.046	-0.095*	0.047
three siblings							-0.387***	0.059	-0.390***	0.059	-0.275***	0.060
four siblings or more							-0.627***	0.061	-0.633***	0.061	-0.466***	0.062
surviving parents												
both parents (ref.)												
one parent: father	0.034	0.066	0.031	0.066	0.049	0.067	-0.618***	0.069	-0.617***	0.069	-0.588***	0.069
one parent: mother	0.027	0.042	0.024	0.042	0.045	0.042	0.048	0.034	0.048	0.034	0.090**	0.034
neither parents	-0.070	0.045	-0.074	0.045	-0.019	0.046						
parents in the same household (0-1)							0.282***	0.037	0.281***	0.037	0.338***	0.037
number of children												
no children (ref.)	0.077***	0.012	0.077***	0.012	0.101***	0.012						
one child							-0.012	0.048	-0.010	0.048	-0.027	0.049
two children							-0.170***	0.050	-0.166***	0.050	-0.148**	0.051
three children or more							-0.283***	0.065	-0.278***	0.065	-0.199**	0.066
resident children (0-1)	0.288***	0.033	0.289***	0.033	0.272***	0.033						
number of generations alive	0.138***	0.027	0.134***	0.027	0.175***	0.027	0.000	0.028	0.000	0.028	0.030	0.029
ever divorced												
never divorced (ref.)												
divorced 1-5 years ago	0.222*	0.094	0.231*	0.094	0.217*	0.094	0.322***	0.081	0.324***	0.081	0.308***	0.082
divorced 6-15 years ago	0.148*	0.068	0.153*	0.068	0.130	0.069	0.080	0.077	0.081	0.077	0.070	0.077
divorced > 15 years ago	0.057	0.053	0.060	0.054	0.055	0.054	0.075	0.094	0.075	0.094	0.110	0.095
stepchildren (0-1)	-0.453***	0.065	-0.450***	0.065	-0.475***	0.066	0.058	0.075	0.059	0.075	0.035	0.075
parental divorce							0.223***	0.039	0.225***	0.039	0.250***	0.039
<i>Value orientations and attitudes</i>												
opinion about helping children (1-5)			0.073***	0.019	0.085***	0.019						
opinion about caring elderly (1-5)								0.049*	0.022	0.053*	0.022	
importance religious ceremony (1-5)			-0.018	0.015	-0.014	0.015		-0.009	0.015	-0.007	0.015	
<i>Structural characteristics</i>												
economic activity												
full-time employed (ref.)												

part-time employed													
retired													
homemaker													
education													
low (ref.)													
mid													
high													
<i>Country</i>													
France (ref.)													
Bulgaria	0.472***	0.046	0.488***	0.047	0.494***	0.048	-0.574***	0.046	-0.603***	0.048	-0.525***	0.049	
Georgia	0.345***	0.049	0.336***	0.051	0.266***	0.052	-0.515***	0.049	-0.556***	0.057	-0.590***	0.058	
Russia	0.733***	0.045	0.742***	0.046	0.712***	0.049	-0.307***	0.047	-0.344***	0.051	-0.276***	0.052	
Germany	-0.111*	0.053	-0.098	0.053	-0.165**	0.054	-1.172***	0.054	-1.186***	0.055	-1.120***	0.056	
Romania	-0.121*	0.048	-0.096	0.051	-0.039	0.052	-1.063***	0.052	-1.076***	0.057	-0.976***	0.058	
Chi ²	4697.48		4713.54		4858.17		2230.45		2235.38		2500.99		
Nagelkerke R ²	0.155		0.156		0.160		0.091		0.091		0.101		

*** = $p \leq .001$, ** = $p \leq .01$, * = $p \leq .05$

Source: Data from the Generations and Gender program (GGP)

Table 3: The influence of parental divorce on emotional care transfers between parents and children.
(Controlled for the characteristics in table 2, model 3a / model 3b)

	<i>Emotional support given to sons</i>				<i>Emotional support given to daughters</i>			
	from mothers		from fathers		from mothers		from fathers	
	b	SE	b	SE	b	SE	b	SE
ever divorced								
never divorced (ref.)								
divorced 1-5 years ago	0.373*	0.155	0.328	0.234	0.164	0.133	0.138	0.225
divorced 6-15 years ago	0.208	0.111	-0.096	0.182	0.116	0.097	-0.094	0.176
divorced > 15 years ago	0.205*	0.087	-0.250	0.148	0.075	0.076	-0.161	0.144
N	20.308		14.416		19.012		13.544	
	<i>Emotional support given to fathers</i>				<i>Emotional support given to mothers</i>			
	from daughters		from sons		from daughters		from sons	
	b	SE	b	SE	b	SE	b	SE
parental divorce (uncontrolled)	-0.346**	0.109	-0.473***	0.119	0.185***	0.051	0.342***	0.067
parental divorce (controlled for living in the same household)	-0.261*	0.110	-0.369**	0.121	0.190***	0.051	0.352***	0.067
N	14.611		11.917		20.133		16.421	

*** = $p \leq .001$, ** = $p \leq .01$, * = $p \leq .05$

Source: Data from the Generations and Gender program (GGP)

Figure 1: Schematic presentation of hypotheses

	<i>Emotional support from parents to children</i>	<i>Emotional support from adult children to parents</i>
Decreased supply compensation hypothesis		number of siblings (-)
Sandwich generations hypothesis	number of parents (-) number of generations (-)	number of children (-) number of generations (-)
Weakening ties hypothesis	ever divorced (-) having stepchildren (-)	parental divorce (-)
Strengthening ties hypothesis	ever divorced (+) having stepchildren (+)	parental divorce (+)
Gender differentiation hypothesis	fathers to children: divorce (-) mothers to children: divorce (+)	children to fathers: parental divorce (-) children to mothers: parental divorce (+)
Emotional preoccupation hypothesis		ever divorced (-) stepchildren (-)

Appendix A: construction of agreement scales

Opinion about caring elderly (Cronbach's alpha = 0.721)
Children should take responsibility for caring for their parents when parents are in need
Children should adjust their working lives to the needs of their parents
Children ought to provide financial help for their parents when their parents are having financial difficulties
Children should have their parents to live with them when parents can no longer look after themselves
Opinion about helping children (Cronbach's alpha = 0.665)
Grandparents should look after their grandchildren if the parents of these grandchildren are unable to do so
Parents ought to provide financial help for their adult children when the children are having financial difficulties
If their adult children were in need, parents should adjust their own lives in order to help them
Importance attached to religious ceremonies (Cronbach's alpha = 0.874)
It is important for an infant to be registered in the appropriate religious ceremony
It is important for people who marry in registry offices to have a religious wedding too
It is important for a funeral to include a religious ceremony