Family ties in the 'empty nest' phase:

#### Relations between parents and their adult children across Europe

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#### Abstract

In this paper we study parents' relationship to their oldest non-coresident child >17 years, from the parent's perspective, using comparable data from the first wave of the Generations and Gender Survey for seven countries: Norway, Sweden, France, Belgium, Bulgaria, Romania, and Russia. The results confirm the importance of the kin-keeping activities of women, resulting in mothers having more contact than fathers with their oldest non-coresident child. Mothers are also more satisfied with their relationship to this child than are fathers. If the child is a daughter rather than a son, this strengthens the relationship to the parent, which testifies to the strength of the mother-daughter bond, corroborating findings in earlier studies. Further, some characteristics of the parent have differential effects for mothers and fathers, such as education or whether the child is with the current partner or not. Thus it seems that separation or divorce has a strongly negative effect for the father but not for the mother.

#### 1. Introduction

The rapid aging of European populations has given rise to considerable research on proximity and contacts of older parents to their adult children as well as the exchange of support and financial resources (Hank 2007, Kalmijn 2008, Bordone 2009). The focus of these studies has generally been on the importance of intergenerational ties for the support of elderly parents from their adult children in terms of care and assistance, and on differences between countries with weak or strong family ties, respectively (Reher 1998). Our focus is on an earlier phase in the family life course, namely the relationship between adult children and their parents in late mid-life (45-69 years), when parents are approaching (or have already reached) the 'empty nest' phase, when their children have left the parental home. According to Grundy and Henretta (2006), it is nowadays common in this age-group to be in the pivotal situation of having one or more surviving parents as well as adult but still partly dependent children. The extent to which parents in late mid-life keep in touch with their non-coresident adult children and the quality of their relationship can be assumed to form the basis of potential intergenerational solidarity in the future, when the elderly parents are likely to need different kinds of support from their adult children.

Close and continuous family relationships coupled with norms of family obligation and reciprocity are likely to be of crucial importance for supportive adult childparent relationships when one or both parents have reached the life stage when the flow of help (and resources) is reversed, from going mainly from the parents to the adult children to going mainly in the other direction, from adult children to their elderly parents. This usually happens around the age of 70 or 75 (Albertini et al 2007). While protection and resources that are mainly provided by the (extended) family in societies without a strong welfare system, can be replaced in countries where the governments are generally relied on for childcare and elder services, there are other sides of the family which cannot easily be substituted by formal organizations. Thus, advanced welfare states, such as the Scandinavian countries, have made the generations less dependent on each other, but they have not rendered the family superfluous (Herlofsson and Daatland 2016). Women and men seem to be just as likely to be involved in family care (for parents and grandchildren) in Scandinavian welfare states, but usually as a supplement, not an alternative, to the welfare state.

### 2. Background

Leaving the parental home is one of the crucial aspects of becoming an adult (Billari 2004). As to circumstances influencing the decision to leave the parental home, Aasve et al (2002) found that income and employment were important in South European countries, but negligible in the Scandinavian welfare states. Billari and Liefbroer (2007) looked at the perceived consequences of leaving the parental home in the Netherlands, and found that respondents expected that leaving home would strongly increase their level of independence from their parents and their level of responsibility. Moreover, benefits were generally expected to outweigh costs. It has been argued that the empty nest transition when children permanently leave the parental home often results in parental depression and emotional distress, more so for mothers than for fathers, and in particular for stay-at-home mothers. However, Mitchell and Lovegreen (2009) found that the majority of midlife parents did not report strong adverse reactions when their children left home. In addition, other research has indicated that marital and life satisfaction in fact increased once children have left, in particular for parents who maintain regular contact with their children (White and Edwards, 1990). Moreover, parents (especially mothers) who kept busy and successfully engaged in work, family, and social roles were found to be less likely to experience 'empty nest syndrome'.

The relationship between young adults and their parents can be looked at from two different perspectives – the young adult as well as his/her parents - and these are not necessarily identical. Aquilino (1999) found that parents generally give more positive reports on the relationship, but regression models predicting intergenerational closeness and conflict were nearly invariant across the parent and child data. There is a growing literature on the long-term implications of childhood family disruption for intergenerational relations, suggesting that parental divorce at earlier ages has lasting negative effects on relations between fathers and adult children, while divorce effects tend to be weaker on mother-child relations (Coony and Uhlenberg 1990, Aquilino 1994a, Lawton et al 1994, Amato 2004, Herlofsson and Daatland 2016). Recent research from the Netherlands also shows that the relationship with the mother may be negatively affected by a divorce (Kalmijn, 2013). Later life divorce, i.e. parental divorce after the child has left the parental home, likewise seems to have negative effect on adult intergenerational relations (Aquilino 1994b). Lawton et al (1994) found a negative effect of parental remarriage, both on contact frequency and affection. These effects were stronger for fathers than for mothers. In general, parent-child

relationships become poorer when parents repartner, particularly when the father has repartnered (Kalmijn, 2013). There is no doubt that increasing divorce rates tend to weaken intergenerational solidarity, in particular vis-à-vis fathers (Herlofsson and Daatland 2016), even though the strength of this effect may vary between countries.

Many studies have shown that gender, both of the parent and of the adult child, is important for the relationship, both with regard to contact frequency and relationship quality). The mother-daughter bond seems to be particularly strong. Thus, it is generally found that mothers and daughters have more frequent contact than fathers and sons or mixedgender dyads (Lawton et al 1994, Rossi and Rossi 1990, Hank 2007, Swartz 2009). Moreover, a study of adult kinship networks showed that women are both more likely to be cited as confidants and to have confidant ties with kin (Hoyt and Babchuk 1983). This is supposed to be related to the so-called kin-keeping activities of women, i.e. that women take a greater responsibility for keeping family members in touch with each other (Hagestad 1986, Lye 1996). Therefore, mothers and daughters are thought to be emotionally closer, to be in more frequent contact and to be more likely to exchange assistance than mixed-gender or male adult child-parent relationships (Lye 1996, O'Connor 1990, Rossi and Rossi 1990). However, the gender of the adult child was not found to matter for contact frequency in Norway (Herlofsson and Daatland 2016). A recent study has also shown that gender differences in the support and care of elderly parents seem to be much reduced in welfare states which provide public services for the elderly compared to countries where elder care is regarded as the responsibility of the family (primarily adult children or grandchildren) (Schmid et al 2012).

Dykstra and Fokkema (2011) have developed a typology of late-life families for West European countries, identifying four different types, namely: 1) descending familialism, 2) ascending familialism, 3) supportive-at-distance, and 4) autonomous, which were robust across northern, central and southern European regions. Each type is prevalent in each country, but the distribution varies. Three of the countries included in our study, namely Belgium, France and Sweden, were also represented in the typology developed by Dykstra and Fokkema. The descending and ascending family types, taken together, were least strongly represented in Sweden, Denmark and Switzerland, and strongly represented in Belgium among other countries. The proportion of the autonomous family type was low in Belgium and high in France (but not in Sweden). The authors note that 'interestingly enough, the proportion of the autonomous type was not the highest in countries which are generally viewed as the most de-familiased' (op.cit, p. 562), according to such researchers as Esping-

Andersen (1999) and Reher (1998). Reher, however, refers to circumstances such as individualism and residential autonomy, and it would appear that his concept of 'weak family ties' can easily be combined with extensive contacts and affection between parents and their non-coresident adult children.

#### **Research** question

In this paper parents' relationship to non-coresident children >17 years, from the parent's perspective, is studied using comparable data from the first wave of the Generation and Gender Survey. We use data on parents aged 45 to 69 years with adult non-coresident children for the following seven countries: Norway, Sweden, France, Belgium, Bulgaria, Romania, and Russia. We are particularly interested in associations between parents' current union status and whether or not they are currently living with the children's other biological parent. There is detailed information about the respondent's current living arrangement (single, cohabiting, married), children in the household, past history of instability, bio-parents alive etc. However, there is less information about the non-coresident children themselves (only age, sex, and age at leaving home, and possibly whether they have become parents). Building on earlier studies, we will contrast 'relationship quality' and 'contact frequency', investigating how various dimensions of family complexity are associated with the strength or the weakness of family ties for the different dyads (mother-daughter, mother-son, father-daughter, father-son), expecting stronger impact of divorce and cohabitation in countries where these phenomena are less common.

How do the six countries included in this study differ in terms of the level of divorce and of cohabitation? The highest net divorce rate (divorces per 1000 married women) is actually found in Russia, followed by Sweden and Norway: 17.95, 12.74 and 11.80 (Kalmijn 2007). Belgium and France have intermediate rates (10.35 and 9.19), while Bulgaria and Romania are characterized by low divorce rates (5.48 and 5.57). Bulgaria, Romania, and Russia also have low rates of cohabitation, as measured by percentage cohabiting of those living with a partner: 7.4, 4.0, and 6.2, respectively (Noack et al, 2013), while cohabitation is common in Norway, Sweden, and France (35.3, 42.0, and 30.6, respectively). Belgium has an intermediate rate of 12.9 percent.

#### 3. Data and methods

We used data from the first wave of the Generations and Gender Surveys (GGS) in Belgium (N = 7,771), Bulgaria (N = 12,858), France (N = 10,079), Norway (N = 14,881), Romania (N = 11,986), Russia (N = 11,261) and Sweden (N = 9,965) carried out in the period 2003-2013. The GGS is a set of comparative surveys which interviewed nationally representative samples of the 18-79 year-old resident population in each country. In the current analyses, we focus on respondents aged 45 to 69 with at least one non-coresident biological child aged 18 or older. This gave a sample of 21,060. The final sample sizes per country are: Belgium (N = 1,533), Bulgaria (N = 2,410), France (N = 2,964), Norway (N =4,568), Romania (N = 3,422), Russia (N = 3,137) and Sweden (N = 3,026).

We utilized two outcome variables. The first of these, *relationship satisfaction*, was measured by asking respondents how satisfied they were with the relationship to their oldest non-coresident child. This variable has values ranging from 0 = very *dissatisfied* to 10 = very *satisfied*. The second dependent variable was made by utilizing a question asking respondents how often they met their oldest non-coresident child. This variable was recoded with values ranging from 0 (never) to 365 (daily). This variable was then log-transformed. We used ordinary least squares regression to test the effect of the independent variables on both outcomes. Multilevel models would have been the preferred method for assessing country level differences. However, with the low number of level 2 units available (i.e., 7 countries), we were not able to use multilevel models. Around 30 level 2 units are normally required to obtain reliable estimates, especially when cross-level interactions are estimated (Hox, 2002).

We included a range of independent variables. First, a set of country dummies were included, with Norway serving as reference in multivariate models (largest country sample). Next, we included a variable measuring respondents' union status at time of the interview. This variable has the following values: Married (1), cohabiting/ dating (2) and single (3). The 'single' category includes not only never-married but also divorced and widowed persons who have not repartnered. Further, combining information on respondents' as well as the gender of the oldest non-coresident child, we separate between the four parent-child dyads: Mother-daughter (1), mother-son (2), father-daughter (3), and father-son (4). Additionally, respondents' as well as the focus child's age was measured in years. To control for nonlinearity, squared terms were included in multivariate models as well.

We further made a dummy separating between whether the current partner of the respondent was the parent of the oldest non-coresident child (0) or whether R got the child with a prior partner (1). Also, a dummy indicating whether (1) or not (0) respondents had experienced prior marital or nonmarital union(s) was incorporated. Educational attainment was grouped into three categories depending on whether respondents had completed any education at the primary, secondary, or tertiary level. We also grouped respondents according to their current employment status. This variable has the following values: Employed full-time or part-time (1), retired (2), and unemployed/other (3). Lastly, respondents were asked about whether they experienced parental divorce before they themselves turned 18 (1) or not (0).

#### 4. Results

Respondents who are single at the time of the survey (including divorced and widowed individuals who have not repartnered) have, somewhat surprisingly, a slightly higher contact frequency than those who are married, while those who are cohabiting or dating see their oldest non-coresident child somewhat less often. Having the oldest child with the current partner has a strongly positive effect on contact frequency. Likewise mothers have more contact with their oldest non-coresident child than fathers, and parents have more contact with their firstborn non-coresident child if this child is a girl (daughters). If the parent is divorced or separated (has previous unions), this significantly reduces the contact frequency. Likewise, parents with a secondary, and even more, a tertiary education see their non-coresident child less often, and this is the same for those who are neither employed nor retired. Among the countries included in this study, two countries, namely Belgium and Russia, stand out as having higher contact frequency than the others.

#### Table 2 in about here

But are parents who see their non-coresident child more often, also more satisfied with the relationship to this child? As the right column in Table 2 demonstrates, this seems true to a large extent, but there are exceptions. For example, parents who are single (who don't live with a partner at time of the interview) see their oldest non-coresident child more often than those who are married, but this is not accompanied by more relationship satisfaction.

Likewise, parental education which had a negative effect on contact frequency, is not associated with less relationship satisfaction. Also, in Belgium and Russia, where parent – child contact frequency was higher than in the other countries, satisfaction with the relationship to the oldest non-resident child was significantly lower than in the reference country Norway.

On the other hand, those respondents who are living with the child's other biological parent at time of the interview are significantly more satisfied with the relationship to the child than those not living with the child's other parent.,. Parents with previous union(s) see their non-coresident child less often, and they report a less satisfactory relationship to this child compared with those who have no prior union experience. This is also true for parents who are neither employed nor retired. Finally, mothers have both more contact and are more satisfied with the relationship to their non-coresident child than are fathers, and the same is true if the child is a daughter rather than a son.

#### Table 3 in about here

The next step is to compare mothers and fathers, both with regard to contact frequency (Table 3) and relationship satisfaction (Table 4). The results in Table 2 showed that mothers have significantly more contact with their oldest non-coresident child than have fathers, and they are also more satisfied with their relationship to this child. However, we find in Table 3 and Table 4 that some characteristics of the parents have differential effects for mothers and fathers. For example, it is clearly more important for fathers than for mothers that the child is with the current co-residential partner. This applies for both contact frequency and relationship satisfaction. On the other hand, mothers have significantly more contact with daughters than with sons, while the gender of the child makes no difference for the father. If the parent is divorced or separated, this reduces the contact frequency for fathers but not for mothers. Likewise, higher education seems to have a stronger negative effect on contact frequency for fathers than for mothers. Finally, mothers in Bulgaria, France and Russia have more contact with their firstborn non-coresident child than have fathers in these countries, and fathers who are neither employed nor retired have less contact with their oldest non-coresident child, while employment status is not important for mothers. And fathers with secondary or tertiary education have significantly lower contact frequency than do highly educated mothers.

#### Table 4 in about here

Are there also differences between mothers and fathers when it comes to satisfaction with the relationship to the oldest non-coresident child? In Table 4 we find that having a child with the current partner is important for both mothers and fathers, but significantly more so for fathers. Being separated or divorced has a strongly negative effect for fathers, but no significant effect for mothers. Having a daughter rather than a son has a positive effect for both mothers and fathers, but more so for mothers, which might testify to the strength of the mother-daughter bond. But employment status is more important for fathers than for mothers.

The gender of both the respondent and the adult child are clearly important, both for contact frequency and relationship satisfaction. Combining them gives us the four dyads of motherdaughter, mother-son, father-daughter and father-son. In Table 5 we find the combined effect of the gender of the respondent and the gender of the adult child. Controlling for current union status of the respondent etc. the results clearly testify to the strength of the mother-daughter bond: mothers have both more contact and a better relationship to their oldest child if it is a daughter rather than a son, while fathers have less contact with their adult children than mothers (regardless of whether it is a son or a daughter). As regards relationship satisfaction, it is the highest for the mother-daughter dyad and the lowest for the father-son dyad.

### Table 5 in about here

#### 5. Summary and tentative conclusions

Our study of family ties in the 'empty nest' phase has confirmed the importance of the kinkeeping activities of women, resulting in mothers having more contact than fathers with their oldest adult non-coresident child. Mothers are also more satisfied with their relationship to this child than are fathers. If the child is a daughter rather than a son, this strengthens the relationship to the parent, which testifies to the strength of the mother-daughter bond, corroborating findings in earlier studies. Further, some characteristics of the parent, such as education or whether the child is with the current partner or not, have differential effects for mothers and fathers. For example, being separated or divorced has a strongly negative effect both on contact frequency and relationship satisfaction for the father but not for the mother.

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#### Table 1. Descriptive statistics (N=21060)

		<u>Percentage</u>		No prior u	inion	No prior unio	n	
Current union sta	itus				Prior union(s)	F	Prior union(s)	
	Married	67,9		87,7	30,7	84,3	15,7	100
	Single	20,4		7,6	44,4	24,4	75,6	100
	Cohabiting	11,7	7,0	2,0	16,4	18,4	81,6	100
	Dating		4,7	2,7	8,6	36,9	63,1	100
Child with curren	t partner			100	100			
	Yes	65,3		91,0	16,6	91,2	8,8	100
	No	34,7		9,0	83,4	17,0	83	100
Posnondont's go				,				
Respondent's ger	Male	43,9		47,0	38,1	47,0	53,0	100
	Female	43, <del>3</del> 56,1		53,0	61,9	38,0	62,0	100
	Temale	50,1		55,0	01,5	30,0	02,0	100
Respondent's age	e (Mean)	58		58,2	57,6			
Gender of oldest	child							
	Son	48,7		48,9	48,4	65,4	34,6	100
	Daughter	51,3		51,1	51,6	65,0	35,0	100
Age of oldest chil	d (Mean)	33,6		33,7	33,5			
Previous union(s)								
	Yes	34,8		0	100	0	100	100
	No	65,2		100	0	100	0	100
Parental divorce								
	Yes	6,4		4,8	9,4	49,0	51,0	100
	No	93,6		95,2	90,6	66,3	33,7	100
Respondent's edu	ıcation							
	Primary	32,4		32,4	32,4	65,3	34,7	100
	Secondary	43,5		44,3	42,2	66,4	33,6	100
	Tertiary	24,1		23,3	25,4	63,3	36,7	100
R's employment s	status							
	Employed	44,1		44,2	43,9	65,3	34,7	100
	Retired	38,1		38,0	38,3	65,1	34,9	100
	Other	17,7		17,8	17,8	65,1	34,9	100
Country								
	Norway	21,7		26,9	11,9	80,9	19,1	100
	Belgium	7,3		6,6	8,6	58,8	41,2	100
	Bulgaria	11,4		13,5	7,6	76,9	23,1	100
	France	14,1		13,2	15,8	61,0	39,0	100
	Russia	14,9		11,3	21,6	49,5	50,5	100
	Sweden	14,4		10,8	21,1	48,8	51,2	100
	Romania	16,3		17,8	13,4	71,3	28,7	100
		100		100	100			

## Table 2. Contact frequency and satisfaction with relationship to oldest

non-coresidential child

(shaded areas denote significance)		Contact frequer	ncy	Relationship satisfaction	
Current union st	atus		p-value		p-value
(ref category: ma	arried)				
	Single	0,09225	0,0315	0,01441	0,7584
	Cohab+dating	-0,07249	0,1195	-0,10461	0,0451
Child with currei	nt partner (ref category: Yes)				
	No	-0,49327	<0,0001	-0,63962	<0,0001
<b>Respondent's ge</b> (ref category: ma					
	Female	0,34353	<0,0001	0,53829	<0,0001
Respondent's ag	le	-0,03987	0,3300	0,08091	0,0631
Age squared		0,00037	0,3046	-0,00066	0,0816
Gender of oldest (ref category: so					
	Daughter	0,07761	0,0035	0,20238	<0,0001
Age of oldest ch	ild	0,02922	0,0522	0,00853	0,6077
Age squared		0,00063	0,0023	-0,00015	0,5312
<b>Previous union(s</b> (ref category: No	-				
	Yes	-0,14372	0,0007	-0,31235	<0,0001
Parental divorce	2				
(ref category: no	)				
	Yes	-0,05723	0,2721	-0,15387	0,0077
Respondent's ed	lucation				
(ref category: pri	imary)				
	Secondary	-0,07022	0,0335	0,03773	0,2767
	Tertiary	-0,29299	<0,0001	0,05563	0,1829
R's employment	status				
(ref category: Ot	her)				
	Employed	0,16782	<0,0001	0,35137	<0,0001
	Retired	0,12919	0,0034	0,32319	<0,0001
Country					
(ref category: No					
	Belgium	0,72991	<0,0001	-0,28677	<0,0001
	Bulgaria	0,09596	0,0800	-0,00875	0,8862
	France	0,06787	0,1455	-0,30777	<0,0001
	Russia	0,25165	<0,0001	-0,27695	<0,0001
	Sweden	0,08498	0,0687	0,36837	<0,0001
	Romania			-0,19354	0,0001

# Table 3. Contact frequency regarding oldest non-coresidential child. OLS.Fathers and mothers.

	<b>Fathers</b>			<u>Mothers</u>	
<i>Current union status</i> (ref category: married)		p-value			p-value
Single	-0,05576	0,4516		0,07854	0,1401
Cohab+dating	0,01387	0,8426		-0,12362	0,0452
Child with current partner (ref category: Yes)					
No	-0,80249	<0,0001	***	-0,23738	<0,0001
Respondent's age	0,01635	0,7963		-0,07832	0,1514
Age squared	-0,00010	0,8535		0,00069	0,1477
<i>Gender of oldest child</i> (ref category: son)					
Daughter	-0,0546	0,1812		0,17588	<0,0001
Age of oldest child	0,01741	0,4147		0,02537	0,2441
Age squared	-0,00047	0,1118		-0,00061	0,0409
Previous union(s)					
(ref category: no)					
Yes	-0,24153	0,0003		-0,09429	0,083
<b>Parental divorce</b> (ref category: no)					
Yes	-0,09544	0,2555		-0,04892	0,4552
Respondent's education					
(ref category: primary)					
Secondary	-0,18544	0,0002	**	0,03565	0,4103
Tertiary	-0,39621	<0,0001	*	-0,20640	<0,0001
<b>R's employment status</b> (ref category: Other)					
Employed	0,32198	<0,0001		0,01709	0,7255
Retired	0,21309	0,0036		0,03917	0,4855
Country					
(ref category: Norway)					
Belgium	0,74951	<0,0001		0,67920	<0,0001
Bulgaria -	-0,03501	0,6628		0,19596	0,0083
France	-0,04932	0,4860		0,14014	0,0225
Russia	-0,02990	0,6843		0,38032	<0,0001
Sweden	0,07981	0,2450		0,07437	0,2373

	<u>Father</u>	5		<u>Mothe</u>	ers
			gender		
Current union status		p-value	interaction		
(ref category: married)					
Single	-0,00721	0.9337		-0,10699	
Cohab+dating	0,00751	0.9250		-0,18119	
<b>Child with current partner</b> (ref category: Yes)					
No	-0,95570	<.0001	***	-0,36218	
Respondent's age	0.13166	0.0666		0.09739	
Age squared	-0,00107	0.0849		-0,00081	
Age squared Gender of oldest child (ref category: son)	-0,00107	0.0849		-0,00081	

0.0021

0.9558

0.9290

<.0001

0.2091

0.6004

0.8283

<.0001

<.0001

0.0061

0.2554

<.0001

<.0001

<.0001

\*\*

\*\*

#### Table 4 Fath

0.14152

-0,00142

0.00003

-0,65022

-0,12503

-0,02942

0.01471

0.47644

0.42599

-0,26697

-0,10815

-0,44439

-0.51918

0.41422

Daughter

Age of oldest child

Previous union(s) (ref category: no)

Parental divorce (ref category: no)

Yes

Yes

Secondary

Employed

Retired

Belgium Bulgaria

France

Russia

Sweden

Tertiary

**Respondent's education** (ref category: primary)

R's employment status (ref category: Other)

(ref category: Norway)

Country

Age squared

Romania	-0,25923	0,001	-0,14381			
Table 5. Contact frequency and relationship satisfaction with oldest						
non-coresident child. Dyads.						

**Contact frequency** 

**Relationship satisfaction** 

p-value

0.0493 0.0056

<.0001 0.0745

0,0902

<.0001

0.2277

0.3607

0.2795

0.0059

0.0146

0.0636

<.0001

<.0001

<.0001

0.3374

0,0002

0.0045

<.0001

0.0265

0.24247

-0,02710

0.00029

-0,06018

-0,18763

0.10549

0.09637

0.24210

0.22831

-0,32356

0,07510

-0,23043

-0,17628

0.31125

Estimate Mother-daugher (ref category)		p-value	Estimate	p-value	
Mother- son	-0,17728	<0,0001	-0,25213	<0,0001	
Father- daughter	-0,45666	<0,0001	-0,59217	<0,0001	
Father-son	-0,40082	<0,0001	-0,73295	<0,0001	

The models also control for current union status, child with current partner, etc