

## INTIMACY AT A DISTANCE?

### MATERNAL CO-RESIDENCE AND CONTACT IN 20 NATIONS

Judith Treas and Philip Cohen

University of California, Irvine

Given that parents and grown children can exchange assistance by living together or by getting together, the relationship between co-residence and contact is--from a comparative perspective—an empirical question of theoretical interest. We might expect co-residence and contact to be positively associated across nations, because some cultures adhere to collective values of familism, while other embrace individualistic orientations (Triandis 1995). Close family ties characterize cultures based on familism. Individuals owe their allegiance to kin on whom they rely for advice, companionship, assistance, and support. In individualistic cultures, family ties are weaker. Individuals make their own way in the world, relying more on impersonal institutions and on persons who need not be kin. Thus, we would expect high rates of both co-residence and contact in family-oriented societies and low rates in individualistic ones.

In contrast to the familism hypothesis, the “intimacy at a distance” hypothesis leads us to expect no association--or even a negative one--between co-residence and contact. According to Rosenmayr (1977), intergenerational co-residence reflects economic or occupational requirements, rather than emotional closeness between the generations. Compelled by economic necessity, co-residence may be fraught with tensions, leading to mutual isolation. On the other hand, separate residence (frequently with grown children living near aging parents) may foster a high level of contact and

assistance between the generations. In societies where the residential independence of generations is valued and feasible, family members may prefer frequent contact (the so-called "intimacy at a distance"), rather than a shared household arrangement (Knipscheer, Gierveld, Van Tilburg, and Dykstra 1995; Wenger 1992). Since the preference for family assistance over formal care is documented even where co-residence is rare (Knipscheer 1992; Tornstam 1992), contact and co-residence may serve as cultural substitutes for one another. The empirical relation between co-residence and contact remains an open question.

This paper makes use of data from the 1994 International Social Survey Program (ISSP) to investigate the association of maternal co-residence and contact for adults in 20 countries. We focus on two ISSP questions. The first asked, "Is your mother still alive?" Respondents answering "yes," were then asked, "How often do you see or visit your mother?" Valid responses include: lives in the same household, daily, at least several times a week, at least once a week, at least once a month, several times a year, and less often. We limit our study to adult respondents whose mothers are still alive, that is, the population "at risk" of living with or visiting their mothers. One model for maternal co-residence analyzes a dummy dependent variable, whether the respondent *lives with* the mother (yes=1, no=0). For those who do not live with their mothers, a model for maternal contact focuses on an ordinal dependent variable; the frequency of face-to-face *visits* ranges from 2 ("less than several times a year") to 7 ("daily"). Responses to the contact variable are approximately normally distributed, with a mean of 3.5, a median of 4 ("once a week"), and a skewness of .001. Given this distribution, we treat the contact variable as continuous in linear models. As independent variables, we consider

individual-level social and demographic characteristics, previously found to be associated with co-residence and kin contact, in separate models for men and women: Respondent's age, marital status, educational attainment, respondent's employment status, and spouse's employment status. We first examine the individual-level determinants of maternal co-residence across all 20 countries, and the differences across countries in the rates of co-residence, net of these individual-level independent variables. We repeat this exercise for frequency of maternal contact. Then, we test whether maternal contact varies across countries as a function of co-residence rates that are adjusted for key life course variables. This adjusted co-residence rate is utilized as a country-level independent variable, enabling us to test whether societal co-residence practices are positively associated with contact (the familism hypothesis) or not (the intimacy-at-a-distance hypothesis). For this multivariate test of the hypotheses, we use the HLM software package to estimate hierarchical linear models incorporating the country-level co-residence variable (Bryk and Raubenbush, 1992).

We find substantial country-to-country differences in both co-residence and contact for both men and women. Although many of the individual-level, independent variables in the model have significant effects on co-residence and on frequency of contact, these factors do not account for the rank orderings of family behaviors at the aggregate level of the countries. Excluding Japan, HLM results show that the higher the proportion co-residing in a country, the more frequently do other offspring have maternal contact. For both men and women, the results are consistent with notions of familistic values affecting various family behaviors. They do not support the expectations of "intimacy at a distance."

To illustrate these patterns, we consider women's mean predicted values on co-residence and visiting, controlling for individual-level variables, for groups of countries: 1) social democratic, 2) liberal, and 3) conservative capitalist welfare regimes, the 4) formerly socialist states, and 5) Italy and 6) Japan separately (because they are outliers in contact and co-residence and have had distinctive experiences as welfare states). The results show high levels of intergenerational family solidarity in the formerly socialist states. Among the capitalist welfare states, the social democratic countries of Norway and Sweden stand out, because their levels of co-residence and contact are lower than those of their European counterparts. Falling between the social democratic and formerly socialist countries on both co-residence and contact, the liberal and conservative states are virtually indistinguishable from one another. Italy and Japan display the highest proportions co-residing, but Italian women visit their mothers very often while Japanese women visit relatively infrequently.