

PART II

THE DEMOGRAPHY OF INTERGENERATIONAL FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS



A. Multiple family generations

The conventional portrayal of family change under the influence of demographic trends is that the extension of life and the drop in birth rates result in “beanpole” families with relatively many vertical ties and relatively few horizontal ties (Bengtson, 2001). Contrary to popular belief, vertically extended families with four or five generations alive at the same time are not the norm (see figure 1). The majority of adults are members of three-generation families. Increased longevity and postponed childbearing have opposing effects on the generational structure of families (Matthews & Sun, 2006; Watkins, Menken & Bongaarts, 1987). The extended lifespan means, on the one hand, that older family members are living longer than they did in the past, which in turn suggests that three, four or even five generations of family members may be alive at the same time. Delayed

childbearing means, on the other hand, that the age gap between generations is relatively large, which in turn reduces the likelihood that multiple generations are alive at the same time.

GGP-data make it possible to examine the opposing effects of increased longevity and postponed childbearing on the generational structure of families. For example, figure 1 shows that the proportions in one-, two-, three- and four-generation families are virtually identical in France and in Russia. The underlying demographic processes are quite different, however, as is illustrated in figures 2 and 3. In France, where people tend to live long lives, adults have relatively many ascending family generations. In Russia, where people tend to have children at a young age, adults have relatively many descending family generations.

Figure 1
Adults aged 20–80, by number of family generations, GGP-countries

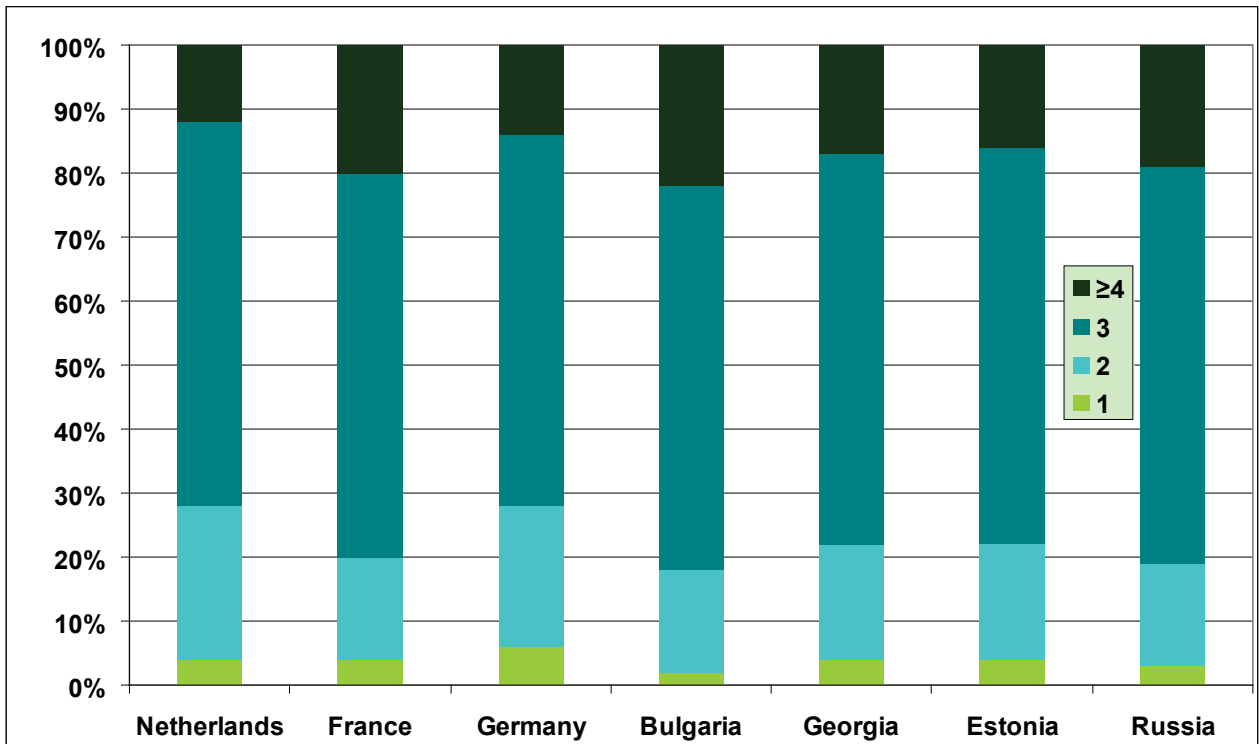


Figure 2
Mean number of descending family generations, GGP-countries

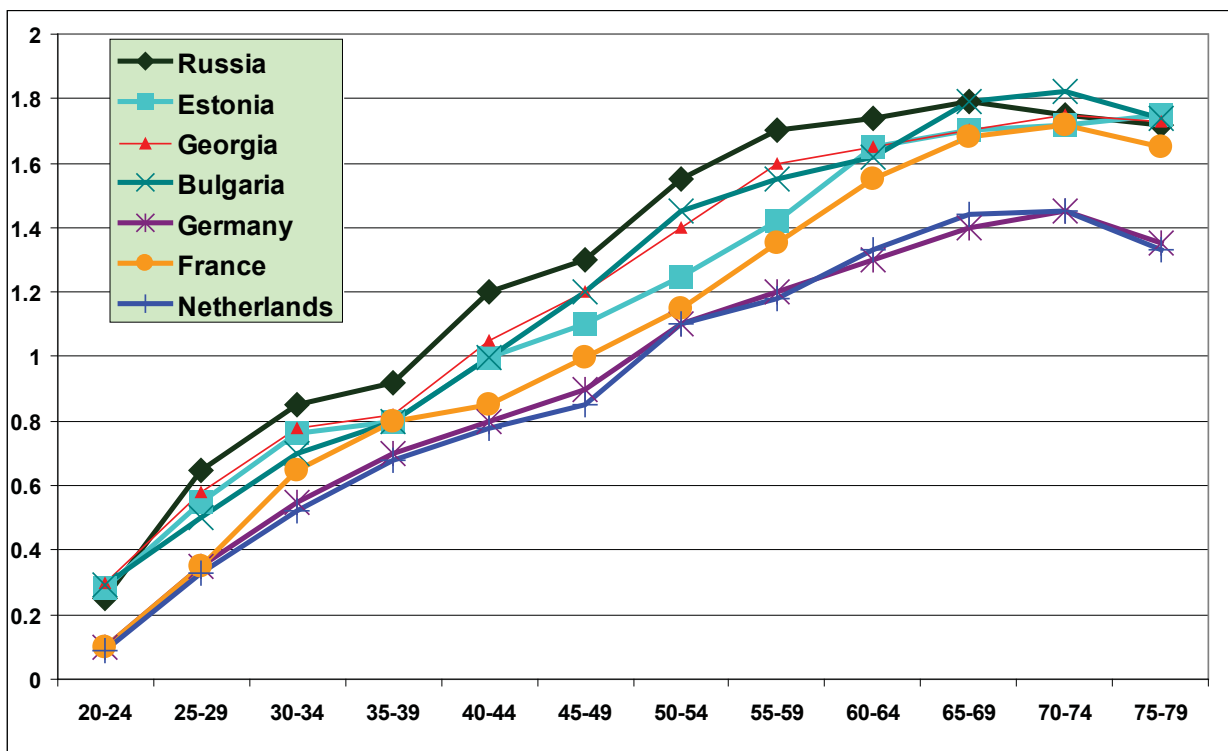
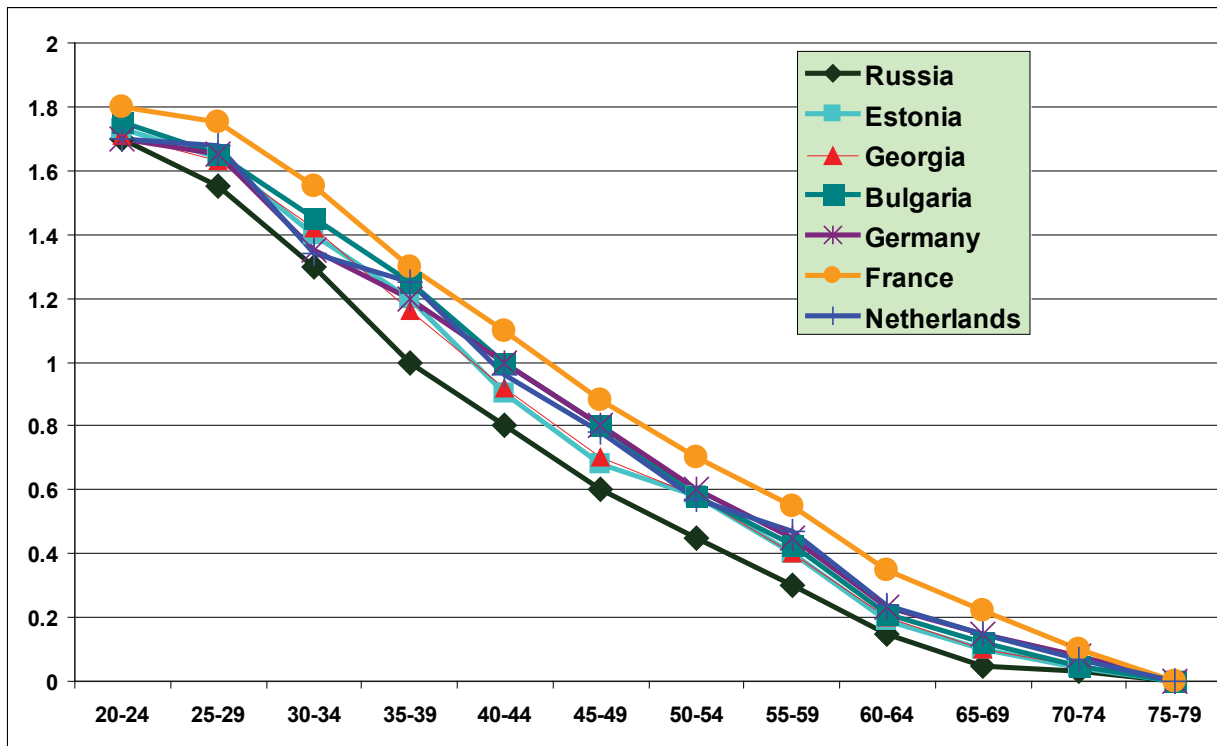


Figure 3
Mean number of ascending family generations, GGP-countries



B. The sandwich generation

Research gives little credence to the metaphor of the “sandwich generation”, the men and women caught between simultaneous responsibilities for their parents and children (Agree, Bissett & Rendall, 2003; Dykstra & Komter, 2006; Rosenthal, Martin-Matthews & Matthews, 1996). Adults typically occupy middle-generation positions between the ages of 30 and 60. This is not a period in life when both young children and elderly parents are likely to need care simultaneously. For those in the younger part of the age-range (i.e., those with childcare responsibilities), parents are not at high risk of frailty. For those in the older part of the age range (i.e., those that might be caring for their parents), their children will generally be leading independent lives already. Though researchers have repeatedly demonstrated that the metaphor of a sandwich generation juggling care commitments towards parents and children is clearly a misconception of midlife, it continues to figure prominently in public and policy debates.

Whereas the literature on the middle generations typically considers transfers upwards to ageing parents and downwards to children and

grandchildren, it tends to disregard transfers received from older and younger generations. Yet, older generations often serve as significant sources of support and help for young families, through financial transfers, caring for young children and provision of practical help (Albertini, Kohli, & Vogel 2007; Attias-Donfut, Ogg & Wolff, 2005). In addition, young adults should not be solely looked upon as dependants, but also as givers of support and care to their parents and grandparents.

C. Vertical deprivation

Little attention has been paid to middle generation individuals who are “vertically deprived” in the sense that they have no children or grandchildren, or no surviving parents or grandparents (Connidis, 2010; Dykstra & Hagestad, 2007). Moreover, whereas an examination of childbearing and mortality patterns informs us about the existence of biological kin, an examination of divorce and separation provides insight into a different form of vertical deprivation, that is, having severed ties. Men are more likely to have broken family ties than women (Dykstra, 1997; Kalmijn, 2007; Kaufman & Uhlenberg, 1998; Lin, 2008).