



Proximity between Elderly Parents and Children in Europe and Welfare: An Update

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1 Introduction

Over the last few decades, European families have shrunk in number, and today are mostly made up of one, two, or at most three people. In Italy, for example, single-member households rose from 22% in 1998-99 to 33% in 2018-19, while those with five members or more declined from 8 to 5% (ISTAT, Italian Statistical Yearbook 2020). These trends seem to have given shape to a Europe increasingly populated by isolated individuals. This is especially evident among the elderly, where the increase in single-member families has been particularly pronounced. Today, in Italy, half of the women over age 75 live at home alone (ISTAT 2020).

Yet this situation is, in reality, quite different when – instead of only considering cohabitation – one accounts for proximity in housing between relatives, a dimension strongly and positively correlated with contact and exchange between generations (Tomassini et al. 2004) as well as with individual well-being, particularly that of the most vulnerable (van der Pers et al. 2015).

In this note, we update the results of previous studies (e.g., Hank 2007), showing that residential proximity between the elderly and their children is profoundly uneven between different European countries. We then observe how in the close future this inhomogeneity will be accentuated by the different fertility that has characterized European countries over the past several decades. Finally, we briefly consider how the differences in proximity between European seniors and their children are interrelated with types of assistance to the frail elderly.

2 Residential proximity between the elderly and their children in today's Europe

We focus here on seniors over the age of 80 who live at home. The proportion with at least one resident child living less than one kilometer away (including cohabitants) changes radically as one moves from North to South and then to Eastern Europe, from 17% in Denmark to 32% in France, 41% in Germany, 66% in Italy, and 70% in Poland (Table 1). Alternatively, one could consider the proportion of only children with parents over eighty who live less than a kilometer from at least one parent. The geographical gradient is unsurprisingly the same: in the Mediterranean and Eastern Europe, the proportion of only children living near their parents is more than double that observed in Central and Northern Europe.

Beyond broad cultural reasons, the residential proximity between adult children and their elderly parents could be linked to specific circumstances. For instance, an elderly person may be more likely to live near a child if he/she has more children, or children may prefer to reside closer to their elderly parent if he or she has physical, mental, or functional difficulties, and so on. Table 2 considers (once again employing the 2017 Survey of Health, Ageing and Retirement in Europe (SHARE) data) the probability of an elderly person living near at least one child with respect to several of their characteristics, net of all the others considered here. There are no differences between men and women. Moreover, after the age of 60, the proximity of the elderly to their children remains almost constant, while among the 50-59-year-olds the proximity is greater, thanks to the greater presence of children still living with their parents. The lack of age differences among seniors over age 60 suggests that the distance between parents and children stabilizes when parents are still relatively young, and/or that the balance between children moving away and approaching is nil. This result confirms that illustrated for Italy by Barbagli et al. (2003, 4th chapter): up until the end of the twentieth century, 60% of young Italian couples set up home less than a kilometer from the parental family of one of the two or both partners. Subsequent studies show that in the first part of the 21st century, things have not changed much (Castiglioni and Dalla Zuanna 2014). The proximity between parents and children is greater in rural areas, among the less educated, and for the elderly who have multiple functional problems. That said, these differences all but disappear in the face of those related to geography. The Northwest gradient vs. South-East Europe is the axis along which the greatest differences in proximity are observed, regardless of other characteristics of the elderly (Figure 1).

Table 1: Proximity between over-80-year-olds and their children in 2017 in 17 European countries and in Israel.

	Seniors over age 80 with at least one child living less than one kilometer away (%)	Single children of parents over age 80 living less than one kilometer from at least one parent (%)
Denmark	18	5
Sweden	24	17
Switzerland	30	25
Belgium	32	28
France	32	28
Estonia	36	33
Israel	36	21
Luxembourg	36	43
Germany	42	33
Czech republic	49	35
Austria	48	36
Greece	58	48
Hungary	62	55
Spain	64	55
Italy	66	57
Portugal	71	61
Croatia	70	60
Slovenia	71	57
Poland	74	45

Source: Our elaborations using SHARE data, year 2017. The SHARE samples are statistically representative of the people who reside in the family, excluding those who live in an institution.

Table 2: Logistic regression *beta* coefficients (in parentheses reference mode, with *beta*=0) for the probability of having at least one resident child within a kilometer. People aged 50+ surveyed in 2017 in 17 European countries and Israel.

		Coefficient beta	Standard Error	(a)
Intercept		1.223	0.064	***
Gender (Woman)	Man	0.015	0.024	
Age (50-59)	60-69	-0.857	0.034	***
	70-79	-1.045	0.036	***
	80+	-0.942	0.043	***
No. children (One)	Two	0.279	0.030	***
	Three or more	0.652	0.032	***
Co-resident partner (No)	Yes	0.177	0.026	***
Education (Low)	Medium	-0.257	0.029	***
	High	-0.401	0.031	***
Residence (Rural)	Small city	-0.116	0.026	***
	Large city	-0.136	0.032	***
House owner (No)	Yes	0.014	0.029	
ADL (b) (No)	1 or 2	-0.111	0.044	*
	3 or more	0.063	0.072	
ADL (c) (No)	1 or 2	0.030	0.037	
	3 or more	0.196	0.054	***
Country of residence (Italy)	Denmark	-1.732	0.066	***
	Sweden	-1.781	0.067	***
	Switzerland	-1.243	0.070	***
	Belgium	-1.167	0.056	***
	France	-1.450	0.062	***
	Estonia	-1.091	0.058	***
	Israel	-0.574	0.074	***
	Luxembourg	-0.645	0.087	***
	Germany	-0.818	0.061	***
	Czech republic	-0.479	0.057	***
	Austria	-0.773	0.064	***
	Greece	-0.300	0.065	***
	Hungary	-0.030	0.087	
	Spain	-0.127	0.058	*
	Portugal	-0.567	0.129	***
	Croatia	0.131	0.079	
	Slovenia	0.163	0.063	**
	Poland	-0.261	0.077	***

^a Significance: *** p<0.01 ** 0.01>p>0.05 * 0.05>p>0.10

^b Activities Daily Living: daily activities that the person is unable to carry out (washing, eating alone, dressing ...).

^c Instrumental Activities Daily Living: daily instrumental activities that the person is unable to perform (doing laundry, preparing food, taking a means of transport ...).

Source: Our elaborations of SHARE data, year 2017

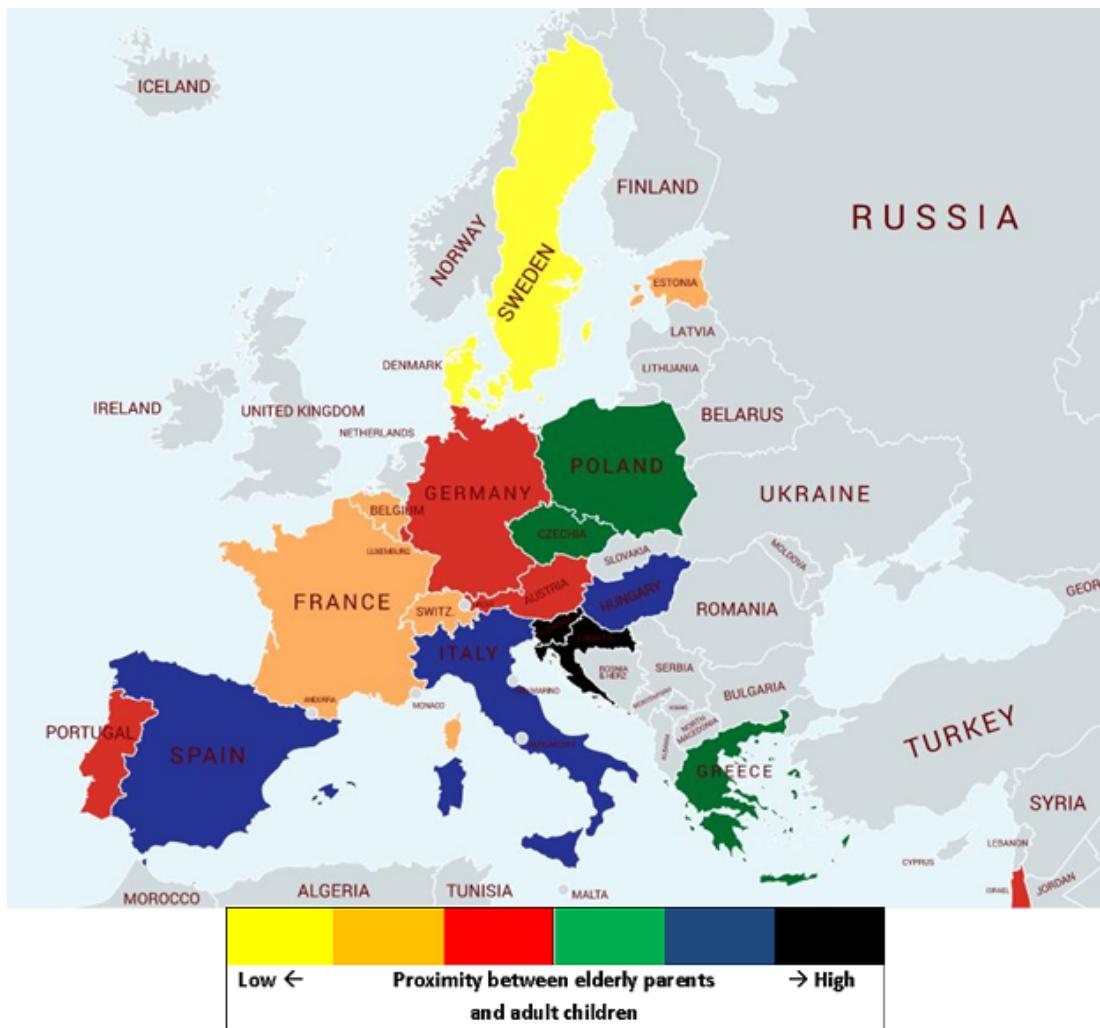


Figure 1: Proximity of parents over age 80 to their children, net of other parental characteristics, for 17 European countries and Israel in 2017.

Source: Our elaborations of SHARE data, year 2017, see beta coefficients of Table 2.

3 Past fertility and future proximity between parents and children

The space-time trend of past fertility will also, in the decades to come, affect the possibility of an elderly European living near his/her children (Van den Broek and Dykstra 2017). In fact, in almost all countries, for adults, as their number of siblings increases, the probability of living near their elderly parents decreases (see the first part of Table 3). For example, in France, 28% of only children live less than a kilometer from their parents over 70, compared to 15% of adults who have two or more siblings. If this behavior remains unchanged over time, and if the fertility of cohorts born in the 1950s and 1960s differs from that of the cohorts born in the 1930s and 1940s, the proportion of children living close to their parents could change, as

could the proportion of parents living close to at least one child.

In some European countries, the fertility of the cohorts born in the 1950s/60s is the same as that of the cohorts born in the 1920s/30s (second part of Table 3). This is the case, for example, in Sweden, France, the Czech Republic, and Hungary. In other countries, however, the number of children "available" for the elderly will decrease significantly in the future. For example, in Italy in 2017 the average number of children aged 50-59 was only 1.56, compared to 2.15 for those over 80; decreases of the same magnitude are observed in Germany, Spain, and Poland. In the latter countries, driven by the increase in only children and adults with only one sibling, the proportion of parents residing close to at least one child could decrease in the coming years, while the share of children residing close to their elderly parents could increase (Dalla Zuanna and Gargiulo 2020). Therefore, past fertility in part determines and accentuates the differences between some European countries in terms of housing proximity between generations.

Table 3: Number of siblings and proximity in 2017 in 17 European countries and Israel.

	% people with parents aged 80+ living less than one km from a parent, by number of siblings			People aged 50+ by number of children by age group in 2017			
	0	1	2	50-59	60-69	70-79	80+
Denmark	5	9	9	2.25	2.13	2.21	2.42
Sweden	17	15	10	2.29	2.34	2.22	2.17
Switzerland	25	14	19	1.90	1.96	1.97	2.27
Belgium	28	19	15	1.99	2.03	2.18	2.35
France	28	19	15	2.35	2.24	2.30	2.24
Estonia	33	24	17	2.10	2.10	1.93	1.65
Israel	21	16	32	2.95	3.11	3.85	3.32
Luxembourg	43	16	21	2.04	1.97	1.76	2.26
Germany	33	26	23	1.82	1.81	2.01	2.23
Czech Rep.	35	34	33	2.39	2.28	2.23	2.00
Austria	36	29	25	1.91	2.02	2.16	2.28
Greece	48	39	34	1.62	1.86	1.88	1.96
Hungary	55	43	34	1.93	1.93	1.78	1.83
Spain	55	45	37	1.95	2.05	2.57	2.55
Italy	57	48	40	1.56	1.77	1.98	2.14
Portugal	61	48	25	2.45	2.39	2.43	3.08
Croatia	60	41	41	1.86	1.94	2.02	1.85
Slovenia	57	48	42	1.80	1.86	2.01	2.00
Poland	45	48	35	2.09	2.41	2.58	2.70

Source: Our elaborations of SHARE data, year 2017.

4 Welfare between strong and weak family ties

The results discussed above confirm that observed by other scholars using older data (see, e.g., Hank 2007): the strength of family ties in Europe continues to profoundly vary according to geography. In Northern and Central Europe, parents and adult children – but also adult siblings (Perales and Plage 2020; Buchanan and Rotkirch 2021) – less commonly live near one another, have less contact, and have less material and immaterial exchanges. This geographical gradient remains when extending the analysis to other countries not included in the SHARE sample. For example, Romania and Bulgaria are quite similar to the SHARE countries of Southern and Eastern Europe (Castiglioni et al. 2016; Heylen et al. 2012), while proximity between parents and adult children in the UK resembles that of the SHARE countries of Central Europe (Wing Chan and Ermish 2015).

The origins of these differences could date back to the distant past, as far even as the diverse cultures of, on the one hand, the Latin and Slavic peoples and, on the other, Germanic populations (Reher 2004). Indubitably, these different traditions have strongly influenced the geography of birth and welfare systems.

The modern welfare state was born in European countries with weak family ties, such as Scandinavia and the United Kingdom. In these places, the State takes greater responsibility for the well-being of its citizens through public services directly usable by the weakest individuals and/or by favoring the birth of a market for services directly accessible to the most vulnerable, without the mediation of the family (Esping-Andersen 1990). Meanwhile, in countries with strong ties, the family is the first to provide for fragile subjects, while the contribution of the State is limited to supporting their action—more so through monetary subsidies than services. Generally, the State intervenes directly only when the family is unable to do so (Moreno Fuentes and Mari Klose 2014).

Three examples illustrate how these differences shape the organization the welfare state. Take, for instance, the residence of the elderly (Figure 2). Although varying by the specific traditions of each State, the proportion of elderly people residing in collective centers is greater in countries where the elderly who live at home are located far from their children. The difference between Italy and France in this regard is considerable. In France, only 31% of the over 80-year-olds living at home have at least one child residing nearby, while 14% of the over-80 live in an institution. In Italy, in contrast, 66% of the elderly living at home have at least one child close by, and only 2% of the over-80s live in a retirement home (moreover, in such cases, three out of four are unable individuals).

Secondly, residential proximity in Southern Europe allows many older individuals to continue living at home, as their adult children are able to manage relationships with domestic staff, even in situations of physical and/or mental frailty (Leone Moressa Foundation 2021). It is no coincidence that caregivers are much more widespread in Southern Europe than in Central-Northern Europe. Consider the following twelve countries: Italy, Spain, Portugal, Greece, France, Germany, Switzerland, Austria, Luxembourg, Belgium, Denmark, and Israel. When accounting only for regular

work, 60% of the total number of domestic caregivers live in Italy, Spain, Portugal, and Greece, and this when only 40% of the total population of these 12 countries lives in these four States (ILO 2013, Statistical Appendix), see Figure 3. The majority of these caregivers are foreign workers.

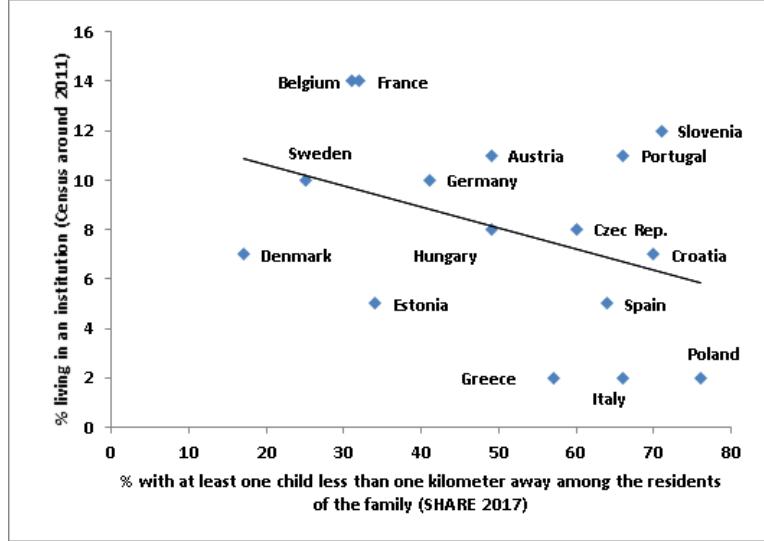


Figure 2: Over-80s: housing proximity to children, and % living in a collective residence in 16 European countries.

Source: Our elaborations of SHARE data, year 2017; Census data collected by Eurostat.

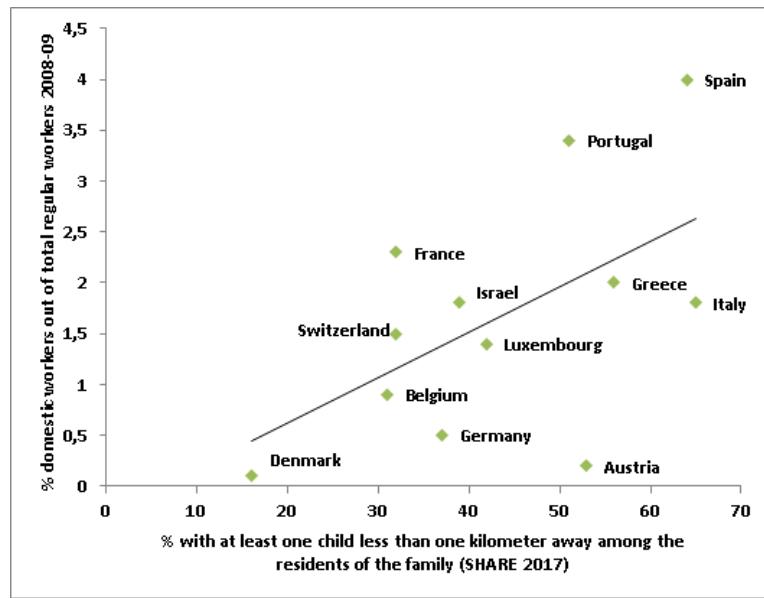


Figure 3: Proximity between 80-year-olds and adult children, and proportion of domestic workers in 11 European countries and in Israel.

Source: Our elaborations of SHARE data, year 2017; ILO 2010.

A third aspect where there emerges a clear distinction between countries with strong and weak family ties concerns the maintenance duties that, by law, citizens must respect regarding relatives and kin in need (Figure 4). The most stringent obligations are in place in the countries of Southern and Eastern Europe, followed by Central Europe, and finally Northern Europe. In Italy, a person in need must be provided for by, in descending order: the spouse, children, parents, direct relatives in the ascending line, siblings, and siblings-in-law, parents-in-law. While a person in this hierarchy is alive, lower-ranked relatives and kin are not required to assist (i.e., if an elderly widower in need has children, it is they who must intervene, while siblings-in-law and siblings are exempt). If there are multiple family members of the same ranking, they are all required to help, each according to his/her financial resources. If they cannot reach an agreement in this regard or do not comply with their obligations, a judge intervenes, somewhat like in the case of divorce. In short, everything is minutely regulated, with the State intervening only in the very last instance, to provide for those who have no one at all. In Germany, mutual obligations exist only between parents, children, grandparents, and grandchildren of grandparents (without, therefore, involving siblings, siblings-in-law, or parents-in-law). In the United Kingdom, the mutual obligation applies only to parents and children, while the most "extreme" case in Sweden, where only parents are obligated to provide for their children, and not vice-versa. There is, moreover, no type of legal obligation to support more distant relatives.

Table 4: Who must provide for a person in need, according to the law?

	Italy	Germany	UK	Sweden
Spouse	x	x	x	x
Parents	x	x	x	x
Children	x	x	x	
Grandparents	x	x		
Grandchildren	x		x	
Siblings	x			
Siblings-in-law	x			
Parents-in-law	x			

Source: *Castiglioni and Dalla-Zuanna 2017, p. 32.*

5 Conclusion

Several concluding considerations can be made in light of these starkly different welfare realities among European countries. It is neither easy, nor perhaps useful, to attempt to discern the chicken from the egg; that is, whether the welfare state was born in Northern and Central Europe to make up for the shortcomings of family aid, or if Eastern and Southern Europe's provision of insufficient welfare has forced families to provide primary assistance to the vulnerable (Reher 2004; Moreno Fuentes and Mari Klose 2014). It is, however, instructive to observe that once the general growth of income and wealth made welfare possible, and once the idea that the State

must take effective action in caring for its most fragile citizens became consolidated, every European state – and not just European – has taken different paths. Notably, these paths are deeply intertwined with the prevailing anthropological structure of families. Moreover, these differences have not disappeared over time, and may, in fact, strengthen in the years to come due to the different demographic dynamics of Northern and Southern Europe.

Any broad judgments of the merits of a given welfare system compared to any other must therefore be made with caution. It is unlikely that the welfare approaches of Denmark or Sweden would be able to maximize well-being for the frail elderly living in Spain and Italy. The identification of the most suitable policies to ensure the best possible conditions for seniors should start with a recognition of the profound diversity of family systems across countries.

Yet, this does not mean that the welfare of each individual country is definitively shaped by the dominant family configuration. Nor does it mean that countries cannot adapt and change in their search for optimal welfare solutions in a given historical period, looking also at the solutions adopted in other countries. Indubitably, however, the most suitable "formulas" for helping seniors in countries with strong family ties, where most elderly parents and adult children live nearby, will look much different than those most appropriate in countries where the majority of parents live far away from their children.

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