

PARENTAL SEPARATION AND INTERGENERATIONAL SUPPORT

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Introduction

Demographic and labor market changes have contributed to increasing flows of intergenerational support; young adults often face a precarious labor market, delay marriage and childbearing, and increasingly rely on parental support. At the same time, while parents remain net donors over the entire life course (Kalmijn 2019), flows of upward support have also been increasing.

Intergenerational support may take different forms, which may substitute or complement each other. For example, parents may provide goods or services directly, or could provide money to purchase them. While societal expectations and individual preferences may contribute to determining the types of support provided, individuals with different characteristics (and with different marital trajectories) may have different capacities to provide support and different needs for support.

Family dynamics have become increasingly complex and differentiated over time, generating a new context of intergenerational support, with shifting needs and capacities across generations and households. Parental separation may generate situations in which different types of support may be differently likely, and may increase or decrease inequalities in intergenerational assistance. Importantly, such dynamics differ across social groups, both in their prevalence and in their consequences (McLanahan 2004). However, not much research has investigated the relation between parental separation and intergenerational support. Against this backdrop, we propose to examine the effect of parental separation on intergenerational support, and contribute to the literature by offering a more exhaustive exam of the specific forms of intergenerational support affected by parental separation, considering fathers and mothers separately. We ask how parental separation is associated with support flows across generations (in both directions), investigate how such association may differ depending on the timing of parental separation and on social class background.

Specifically, we examine (i) the role of parental separation for a range of support types (material, emotional, instrumental), as well as for both downward (from parents to children) and upward (from children to parents) support, accounting for potential interdependencies across support of different types and in either direction; and (ii) the moderating effect of social background and age at parental separation on the relation between parental separation and intergenerational support. We look at the German case, which is characterized by a rather generous welfare state; while that reduces need of support for the old age, in particular, family services (public or private childcare) are scarce or expensive, which increases the need of material support from parents.

Background literature and theoretical framework

According to reciprocity perspectives, family transfers operate within an exchange framework (Silverstein & Bengtson 1997) and relative needs of family members are a key determinant of transfers. Social exchange theory posits that human behavior is influenced by rational choices about benefits and costs (Coleman 1990): parents might provide more assistance to children from whom they receive, or expect to receive, help and vice versa.

Parental separation is a major event in one's life course, which is part of one's family background. Importantly, parental union dissolution changes the balance of needs and resources between parents and children (Dykstra 1997). Non-intact family structures and parental separation have been consistently found to be negatively associated with net wealth among adult children in several countries (Lersch & Baxter 2017; Cavanagh et al. 2008) and with transfers from parents to adult children, for fathers in particular (Grundy 2005). Parental separation reduces intergenerational exchanges between parents and children (Dykstra 1997) and is negatively associated with the economic resources of the parental generation (Gruber 2004).

Previous research on intergenerational relations reveals the importance of distinguishing among types of support (Parrott & Bengtson 1999). As most extant literature looks at one specific type of

support or combines different types of support into one index (e.g. Fingerman 2015), our work will improve our understanding of intergenerational flows of support by investigating multiple types of support separately, accounting for potential interdependencies across support of different types and in either direction.

The timing at which parental separation occurs may affect its consequences. Timing may affect closeness to parents (the earlier it occurs the lower the closeness) as well as the reproduction and accumulation of disadvantage; stratification research shows that parental separation in childhood puts individuals in early disadvantages that accumulate over the life course (McLanahan 2004). Accordingly, we will investigate difference in the timing of parental separation. We will also address the extent to which social background buffers or expands the consequences of parental separation for intergenerational support.

Data and Methods

Data and sample. We use longitudinal data from the first eight waves of the German Family Panel *pairfam* (2008-2015; release 10.0). *Pairfam* is a multi-disciplinary, longitudinal study for researching partnership and family dynamics in Germany, and collects information from a nation-wide probability sample of three birth cohort groups 1971/73, 1981/83 and 1991/93 (Huinink et al. 2011). Our analytical sample consist of 5,508 respondents who provided information on parental separation status and who lived with the two biological or adoptive parents after childbirth.

Intergenerational support. We consider three major dimensions of support, and two directions of provision: (i) support given to parents (upward support) and (ii) received from parents (downward support). Respondents were asked to indicate the frequency of support activities within the last 12 months on a 5-point scale ranging [1=Never; 5=Very often]. For emotional support, two items were used referring to advice regarding personal/parent's problems and to talk about personal/parent's worried and troubles. For material support, two items were used referring to financial help and to gifts. For instrumental support, two items were used referring to household help and to care for family members. Additionally, we used an indicator of downward support relative to childcare help. For each type of support and direction of support provision, we built parental sex-specific indicators that take value 1 if any support was provided in any frequency during the last 12 months, and value 0 if not. Alternative operationalizations have been addressed in robustness checks.

Relationship status of the (biological or adoptive) parents. We combined information on the occurrence and year of parental separation predating the study that was provided in wave 6 with on-time information on the death status of each parent and the relationship status between the parents in each survey wave. We built a categorical variable with three categories: both (biological or adoptive) parents are (again¹) together, parents are separated, and one of the parents is dead.

Additional control variables. We use a range of variables known to confound the study associations as controls in multivariate analyses. This includes age, gender, education (in years), migrant status, type of settlement, age of mother at birth, parental education (in years), and sibship size. As of the (multi-cohort, panel) study design, we additionally control for panel survey wave and birth cohort group.

Analytical strategy. We estimate logistic regression models predicting each type support for downward (parents to children) and upward (children to parents) support simultaneously. Models for fathers' and mothers' support outcomes are estimated separately. We regard mothers and fathers as sources and recipients of support separately, given that we are interested in outcomes for respondents with separated parents, and prior research found differences in the patterns of support by the gender of the parent (Sommer & Buhl 2018). All model specification include the control variables outlined above, and an individual-level unobserved term capturing individual specific

¹ We do consider as parents living together a few separated parents who reconciled before the study. Sensitivity analyses show no differences on results when respondents whose parents temporarily separated are excluded.

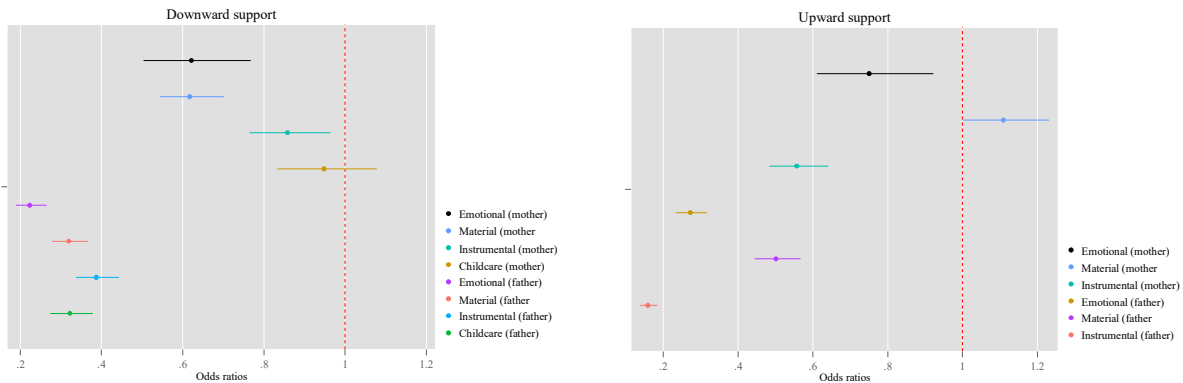
unobserved variation across all types of support outcomes studied. Additional models (not shown) included additional variables (and interactions) to test variations of main results.

Selected results

Figure 1 shows the coefficients (as odds ratios) of parental separation for each support outcome from simultaneous estimation across outcomes. Our results suggest that parental separation mostly truncates intergenerational support between parents and adult children. Regarding downward support, results from Figure 1 indicate that fathers provide less support of any type to their children if they separated from than if they stayed together with the mothers, with odds ratios ranging between 0.2 and 0.4. On average, mothers also provide less emotional, material and instrumental support if they separated than if they stayed together with the fathers, but not as few as separated fathers (as odds ratios range between 0.6 and 0.9). Only mothers who separated provide as much childcare support as mothers who stay together with the fathers. Regarding upward support, results from Figure 1 indicate that fathers receive less support of any type from their children if they separated from than if they stayed together with the mothers. Fathers receive less material support than emotional support, and more instrumental support than emotional support. In contrast, mothers receive less emotional and instrumental support, but more material support if they separated from than if they stayed together with the fathers. All in all, these results further knowledge by confirming that (with a few exceptions) the extension of the negative effect of parental separation on intergenerational support to a number of support types, to both directions of intergenerational support (from parents to adult children and *vice versa*), and to mothers as well as fathers.

We also find that the associations are partly moderated by separation timing and social background (results not shown). We find no relevance of age at separation for intergenerational support between children and mothers. Interestingly, the negative effect of parental separation for intergenerational support between children and fathers is reduced if parents separated when children were adults. Support between children and separated mothers is stronger with maternal education, but not with paternal education.

Figure 1. Effects of parental separation on intergenerational support outcomes.



Further work

Further work includes the examination of several mechanisms that explain the empirical associations outlined in the results section. Conceptually, complementary theoretical perspectives propose that the associations can be explained by the economic turmoil of separation, the erosion of family bonds, the emergence of complex families (e.g. step-families), and (truncated) transmission processes (e.g. value socialization, social status, family behavior). We count on a range of variables to empirically test the mechanisms, including information on parents' family structures and financial situation, and children's emotional closeness with parents, attitudes to parents (value of parents),

distance to parental residence, family status and occupational status. Results from bivariate analyses and robustness checks of the multivariate analyses will be presented in the full paper.

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