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Intergenerational Relations and Migration: Closely Connected despite Distance?

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Crucial features of intergenerational cohesion are contacts, emotional closeness or the importance of the relationship between parents and their adult children who do not live in the same household anymore. Unfortunately, previous empirical studies have mainly addressed the intergenerational proximity patterns of the native population, whereas the population of foreign origin has been largely neglected. However, against the background of ageing societies as well as contemporary multi-ethnic and transnational societies, the question of intergenerational closeness of native and migrant family members across households is of particular importance.

Although the (emotional) proximity between parents and their offspring are not only relevant for the individuals themselves but also for society in general (e.g. social isolation in advanced age), little is yet known about the determinants, country-specific differences and especially migration related circumstances. Due to the relevance of especially intergenerational contacts as a relevant precondition for many other forms of (functional) solidarity, the presentation addresses contact frequencies, as well as emotional closeness and the importance of the relationship in a multicultural perspective capturing differences and similarities between native and migrated families. Therefore, our proposed contribution focuses on (a) differences and similarities in closeness patterns between migrant, interethnic and native families and (b) differences within migrant families. The main research questions are: How intense are generations closely connected with each other in general and are there differences observable between (2) the native population and migrants as well as within the group of migrants?

In theorising about the manifestation of intergenerational solidarity in general and associational solidarity, that means contacts, and affectual solidarity, emotional closeness and importance, in particular within migrant families, scholars have made contradictory assumptions. Different theoretical positions have postulated divergent causes and



consequences of migration (see Baykara-Krumme 2008). The first approach, the so-called solidarity thesis, implies that intergenerational relationships in general and contacts as well as emotional closeness and the importance of the relation in particular are intensified in families with a migration background. On account of cultural differences in family norms between the home and the host country, generations within migrant families are supposedly more closely connected than the native population. In addition, stronger cohesion and solidarity can also be seen as a reaction to specific experiences connected with the immigration process (see Dumon 1989). Following this assumption, more intense mutual family support, contact frequencies and closer connectedness can also evolve as a means of compensating for lost contact with former friends, neighbours and other relatives from the home country or a lack of relationships in the host country.

In contrast, the cultural conflict thesis assumes that parent–child relationships and therefore also intergenerational closeness in migrant families are weakened owing to the experiences of the migration process and the subsequent situation in the host country (see Park 1964). In this perspective, Portes and Zhou (2005, 85) claim: “Growing up in an immigrant family has always been difficult, as individuals are torn by conflicting social and cultural demands, while they face the challenge of entry into an unfamiliar and frequently hostile world.”. These assumptions are based on aspects of modernisation theory and focus on cultural distances between the society of origin and the host country (see also Portes and Rumbaut 2001). According to this perspective, intergenerational relationships among the migrated population are assumed to be characterised by less cohesion and proximity.

Further theoretical and empirical insight can be expected on the basis of the drift, strain and safe haven hypotheses (Szydluk 2016). Growing up in different countries as well as migration experiences can lead to family generations ‘drifting apart’ to some degree, suggesting less solidarity and common activities as well as contacts, emotional closeness and feelings of importance of the relation. The strain hypothesis argues that stressful situations can lead to estrangement and conflict amongst family members, which in turn can also reduce cohesion and closeness. However, according to the ‘safe haven’ hypothesis, migrants are likely to maintain stronger family bonds. Since living in a new society often goes along with cultural discrepancies between home and host countries as well as huge challenges, insecurities and even discrimination, migrants might have a more pronounced need for a close family circle as a ‘safe haven’ in an unfamiliar environment.



The empirical analyses of the proposed paper are based on the on the new representative study "SwissGen – Intergenerational Relations in Switzerland". The survey was conducted in 2018/19, including more than 10,000 respondents from 18 to 100 years in all three parts of Switzerland (German, French, and Italian Switzerland). According to the information provided by the respondents, migration is defined by birth in a different country and/or the possession of a citizenship of a country other than the one in which the person currently lives. According to this definition, approximately 33 per cent of the surveyed respondents have a migration background and were born in one of 109 different countries.

Overall, our results highlight that family generations are closely connected by intergenerational contacts, emotional closeness and the importance of the relationship. Approximately 68% of the respondents living in Switzerland are in contact with their own parents on a at least weekly basis. Contrary, only 10 per cent of the respondents have (almost) no contact to their own parents. Furthermore, over 30 per cent report a very close relationship to their parents which however appears to be more pronounced to mothers than to fathers. Finally, the general importance of parents is also high with almost 50 per cent. But again, mothers are described as more important than fathers.

By concentrating on intergenerational closeness of native and migrant families, several differences and similarities can be observed. In general, both native and migrant families are frequent connected either personally, by phone, mail or any other electronic means. However, our findings suggest that migration matters for intergenerational closeness. Despite greater geographical distances, migrants stay slightly in more frequent contact to their own parents compared to the native population. Moreover, migrants report more often emotional closer relationships and the importance of mothers and fathers is also higher for the foreign population in Switzerland.

Nevertheless, when considering the complexity of migration, clear differences in the intergenerational closeness between generations within the group of immigrants become apparent. This refers, for example, to the question at what time and thus stage in their lives they migrated – such as during childhood, when in education or employment, during the time of family formation or retirement – has for example a significant influence on intergenerational contacts within the group of migrants. In this respect, the total time spent in the country of residence as well as geographical origin and citizenship have a lasting effect on intergenerational contacts. A similar picture can be observed for emotional closeness and the importance of the relationship.



To sum up, the empirical analyses prove that family generations in Switzerland in general are closely connected with one another through frequent contacts, strong emotional closeness and a high importance of the relationship. However, more specifically, there are also striking differences between migrants and natives and between various migrant groups. Migration does matter. Theoretical reasoning and empirical investigations should therefore closely address the specifics of intergenerational solidarity patterns of both natives and migrants and their families by considering individual needs and opportunities, family structures and cultural contexts.

References

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