

LIVING ARRANGEMENTS AND DIFFERENCES IN FAMILY SUPPORT; A COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

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Introduction

Nowadays, demographers and social scientists discuss the sharp differentiation between regions in Europe contrasting Southern Europe where the family and family ties are 'strong' to Northern Europe, where families and family ties are relatively 'weak'. They based their theoretical ideas on differences in family attitudes and on the varying percentages of older adults either living independently or co-residing with adult children. Policy makers follow these dualistic views explicitly or implicitly, applauding the southern European family arrangements and criticizing the individualistic situation of Northern Europe, where older people are said to be 'neglected' by their children.

However, empirical research not always supported this dualistic view on family life in Europe: recent research outcomes argued in favour of a more nuanced differentiation between family types in European countries (Glaser, Tomassini and Grundy, 2004). In this paper the differentiation between European regions in older adults' living arrangements, family support and quality of life is addressed. In doing so, an important outcome variable of quality of life, loneliness, has been used.

1. Background section

A significant proportion of adults aged 50 and over lives in one person households and a trend towards more smaller residential units among older adults is clear. Especially in the Western oriented countries, older adults normatively and de facto favor intimate relationships with adult children, but 'at a distance'; older persons intend to live independently for as long as possible, and prioritize non-instrumental, emotional contacts with their children. In other countries family norms are more traditional, prioritizing daily instrumental supportive relationships between older parents and adult children; main responsibility lies in the hands of the oldest son (and his family) in Japan and in the hands of the youngest son in Georgia. Co-residence is prioritized and a main characteristic of older adults' living arrangements in Southern and Eastern Europe. In some countries of the former Soviet Union such as the Ukraine, where the socio-economic crisis resulted in decreasing income levels for the older adults, recently an increasing level of co-residence of the elderly and their adult children has been shown (Bezrukov & Foigt, 2002).

Living independently in small residential units or living in co-residence with adult children has different outcomes as far as the quality of life is concerned. Living independently might be

positive in guaranteeing autonomy, independence in decision making and in creating one's own lifestyle. The majority of the oldest olds living alone or as a couple-only succeed in continuing to live independently. The risks of loss of independence are higher for childless than for older adults who can rely on children geographically nearby. Those with higher educational levels and in the higher income brackets prove to benefit and are more successful in continuing independence as compared to those who live near or under the poverty line. However, older adults in small residential units run the risk of decreasing social network sizes, decreasing contacts with kin and non-kin that might result in feelings of loneliness. Co-residence at the other hand can work out positively in intergenerational in-house exchanges of support and care, although many researchers report an imbalance in support giving and receiving, with the older generation taking the larger part of the burden of housekeeping, care for the grandchildren, and sharing the old age pension income (Kohli, 2004). It is generally expected that co-residence might provide more optimal conditions for alleviating loneliness.

Loneliness is a universal phenomenon, but the antecedents vary to a large extent based on personal and contextual determinants (De Jong Gierveld, Van Tilburg, & Dykstra, 2006). Perlman and Peplau (1981, p. 38) define loneliness as "the unpleasant experience that occurs when a person's network of social relations is deficient in some important way, either quantitatively or qualitatively." Loneliness is a subjective and negative experience, the outcome of the cognitive evaluation of the match between the *quantity* and *quality* of existing relationships and relationship standards. Loneliness has to be sharply differentiated from social isolation that concerns the objective characteristics of a situation and refers to the absence of relationships with other people. Research into loneliness that takes into account intergenerational co-residence as well as living in small residential units is very scarce; this paper intends to close this gap and address different familial and household types in both Western and Eastern European countries. This brings us to a refinement of the research questions: To what extent are older adults in European countries from West and East confronted with loneliness? Does living in small residential units coincide with loneliness? Does co-residence guarantee the absence of loneliness of older adults?

2. Data and methods

Data for this study come from the internationally comparative Generations and Gender Surveys, initiated by the Population Activity Unit of the UN ECE in Geneva. Each country survey encompasses more than 10.000 respondents aged 18 to 79 years. I selected the data of two Western European countries: France and Germany, and three countries in transition: Russia, Bulgaria and Georgia. Out of the country samples I selected women and men aged 60 years and over.

Loneliness, the dependent variable, is measured using the 6-item version of the De Jong Gierveld Scale (De Jong Gierveld, & Van Tilburg, 2006). The scale has proven to be reliable and valid.

Living arrangements. For each of the respondents information is available about all the persons living in the same household: e.g. age, relationship towards the respondent (spouse, parent, child, etc) and sex. On the basis of this information it was possible to construct a typology of living arrangements: (1) older adults in small households (that is living alone or as a couple-only) and (2) older adults in co-residence with adult children.

3. Results

In Figure 1 data about the living arrangements per country are shown. Living in small residential units is most frequently seen among older women and men in France and Germany, followed by Russia, Bulgaria and Georgia. Co-residence is high in the Russian Federation, Bulgaria and especially in Georgia.

FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

In figure 2 data about the association between living arrangement types and loneliness are shown, separately for older adults in small residential units and for those co-residing with adult children.

FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE

Figure 2 shows that living arrangement types are related to intensity of loneliness: those living in small residential units are characterized by the highest mean levels of loneliness in each of the countries, indicating that co-residence is a more optimal condition for alleviating loneliness. However, the differences in intensity of loneliness showed to be only modest. Striking differences are shown between the countries. The Western European countries are characterized by mean loneliness levels below '2', and all three Eastern European countries are characterized by mean loneliness scores above '2' (Bulgaria and Georgia scored mean loneliness levels above '3'). Scores of '2' and lower are considered to represent mildly or not lonely people, while scores above '2' indicate mediate to strong loneliness levels.

4. Conclusion

Also after taking into account other factors such as gender, age, household income situation, educational level, subjective health, mean levels of loneliness between older adults in small residential units and those in co-residence does not differentiate sharply and country differences in the intensity of loneliness are shown to be still very important.

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Figure 1.

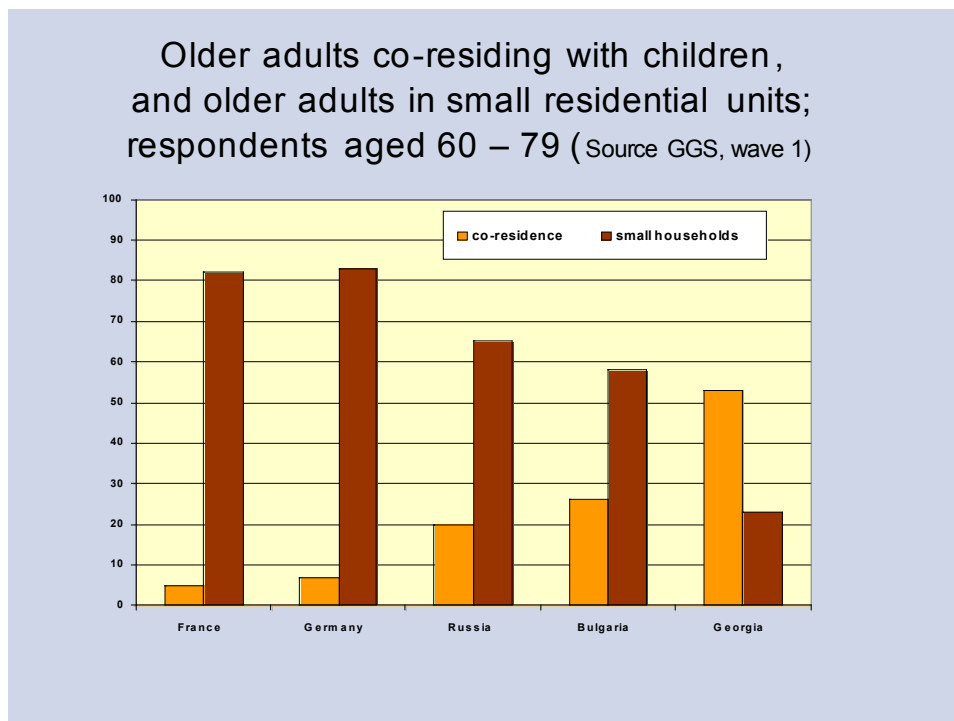


Figure 2.

Mean loneliness scores (Scale de Jong Gierveld) by living arrangements ; respondents aged 60 – 79 in several countries (Source GGS, wave 1)

