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- Parent-child relations among very old parents in Wales and the United States: A test of modernization theory.

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PARENT-CHILD RELATIONS AMONG VERY OLD PARENTS IN WALES AND THE UNITED STATES: A TEST OF MODERNIZATION THEORY

ABSTRACT: This study contrasts the structure of parent-child relationships of older parents living in Wales, U.K. with those of older parents living in the United States. Specifically, we examine whether the principal dimensions of intergenerational solidarity, and their associations with each other, are invariant across two national cultures. Comparable measures are assessed from the responses of older parents participating in three surveys: Bangor Longitudinal Study of Ageing (N=139), USC Longitudinal Study of Generations (N=129), and AARP Study of Intergenerational Linkages (N = 102). Overall, there were fewer differences than expected among the samples. Although proximity and contact with adult children were higher among older parents in the Wales sample, there were no appreciable differences in emotional closeness and receipt of help. However, there was a significantly higher correspondence between proximity and emotional closeness among Welsh parents than among both samples of American parents, suggesting that parents in North Wales forge more intimate ties with local children. Moreover, older Welsh parents were more likely than older parents in the American samples to receive help from children who were both proximate and emotionally close. The results are interpreted in terms of the greater importance that neolocality plays in promoting intergenerational integration within more traditional cultures and more rural societies.

INTRODUCTION

The study of intergenerational relationships in the older family has aroused great interest within the discipline of gerontology. Much of the scholarly discussion has focused on the question of whether adult children will continue to be sources of support to their elderly parents in the wake of urbanization, economic development, and changes in social values that have placed great strains on families in both the developed and developing worlds. Concerns that the forces of modernization--particularly geographic mobility and the erosion of values associated with family responsibility for elders--have compromised the capacity and the willingness of the contemporary family to care for its older members have resulted in fears that society will be unable to cope with the demand for support created by deficits in family functioning. These issues are particularly pertinent in developing countries where worries are voiced about the viability of their traditionally strong system of family care for the elderly (Choi 1996; Gore 1982; Ingstad et al., 1992; Sinha 1991; Tout 1989).

In this article we examine the relationships between very old parents and their adult children in North Wales and the United States--two societies that vary in size, cultural values, and degree of economic development and urbanization. Our theoretical orientation draws on modernization and cultural theories to explain cross-societal variation in the intergenerational relationships of the advanced aged. We test for cross-national differences in the structure and function of these relationships using measures of family cohesion that represent several key dimensions of the construct, intergenerational solidarity (Roberts, Richards, and Bengtson 1991). Further, we examine whether parents in each nation who receive support from children have similar intergenerational relationship profiles based on the measures of solidarity.

Background

A central theme invoked in discussions concerning the reliability of family support to the elderly is the role that modernization has played in altering family structures and functions. We draw on theories that treat define modernization as a nexus of distinct but interrelated social changes, which together differentiate societies along a single dimension. In the study of intergenerational relationships, these discussions generally focus on three manifestations of modernization: economic development and geographic mobility, urbanization, and the weakening of filial piety as a guiding principle of social life.

According to modernization theory the more advanced the economy of a society, the lower the status accorded its elderly citizens (Cowgill 1986). This phenomenon is thought to operate through the targeting of training and the allocation of occupational roles to younger workers. In an economy characterized by rapid increases in knowledge and high levels of specialization adult children are compelled to move away from their families of orientation in order to maximize their educational and occupational attainment. This mobility has resulted in greater geographic separation between the generations and a historical decline in the amount of contact between older parents and their adult children (Crimmins and Ingegneri 1990; Stearns 1989). Indeed, adult children in most Western nations tend not to coreside with their parents--and often live far from them. This is taken by some as evidence that the intergenerational family is in decline and that older parents are isolated from their children in the modern family (Parsons 1944; Popenoe 1993; United Nations 1971). Indeed, differences in kinship structures appear to correlate with national economic development. For example adult children in less developed southern and eastern European nations are more likely to live closer to their parents than are those in other European and North American nations (Hollinger and Haller 1990).

The degree of urbanization is another manifestation of societal modernization credited with fragmenting the intergenerational family through geographic separation. From this perspective, young adults leave rural areas for jobs in cities, while older people move away from metropolitan areas in favor of more rural retirement communities (Clifford et al. 1982). Indeed, it is the very economic success of developed societies that has provided the disposable income and active life-expectancy necessary for a recreational retirement (Karn 1977; Rees 1992; Warnes 1994). However, geographic dispersion of the generations appears to be mitigated by return migration of older people to their communities of origin, as poor health and the death of a spouse triggers the need for familial assistance (Feinstein and McFadden 1989; Lin and Rogerson 1995; Litwak and Longino 1987; Silverstein 1995).

Families are also guided by cultural beliefs or ideologies that guide which family forms are preferred and which are considered inappropriate. Variation in these beliefs are typically found between urban and rural sectors of society, and between more highly and less highly developed societies. In the United States, people raised in rural areas--

--especially on farms--express stronger filial responsibility than those raised in urban areas (Lee et al. 1994). The strong obligation toward elders in rural areas is thought to derive from the power that land ownership and control confers on the elderly, (Nason 1981; Nydegger 1983; Salamon & Lockhart 1980; Tsuya and Martin 1992). In Northern Thailand a study found that the more land an older person owned the greater the likelihood of their children following traditional patterns of caring (Caffrey 1992), while several studies of rural southern communities in the U.S. found that elderly parents placed obligations on their children for support in exchange for allowing them to settle on their land (Groger 1992; Lozier and Althouse 1974).

There have been important challenges to the normative basis of modernization theory, in so far as the theory has proposed a monotonic weakening of intergenerational family relations with increasing societal development. For instance, strong filial obligation to the elderly has been noted in such developing Asian nations as the Philippines (Domingo and Asis 1995) and Thailand (Knodel et al. 1995), as well as in Latin American nations of Colombia, the Dominican Republic, Costa Rica, Panama, Peru, and Mexico (de Vos 1990). A United Nations University study of seven developing countries (India, Singapore, Thailand, South Korea, Egypt, Brazil and Zimbabwe) concluded that older people were likely to favor co-residing with their children despite rapid urbanization and economic growth (Hashimoto 1991; see also Sung 1992). Indeed, beliefs may supersede the influence of economic development and urbanization on family structure and function. A dramatic example is in Japan, where 68.7% of its elderly population lived with children in 1980 (Maeda 1983) and where duty to older relatives is reinforced by norms of filial piety. Pervasive cultural beliefs about families may overwhelm other population distinctions, for instance in Spain where older people in both urban and rural areas expect similarly high levels of contact and help from their children (Korte 1982).

Although filial piety--unquestioned respect, responsibility, and sacrifice for family elders--is considered by some to be eroding as a central norm governing intergenerational relations in developing nations (Caffrey 1992; Cheung et al. 1994; Foner 1993), it is often characterized as having been completely lost in modern Western nations. Yet studies have consistently identified adult children as key sources of interaction and support for older parents in the most highly modernized societies, casting doubt on the conclusion that the contract between generations is truly abrogated (Duffy 1984; Hashimoto 1993; Johnson 1995). Although older parents in developed countries have less contact and are less likely to live with their children when compared with their counterparts in undeveloped and developing countries, neither do they appear to have been abandoned by their offspring (D'Costa 1985; Shanas 1973). In Western industrialized countries intergenerational solidarity--including intimacy, contact, the exchange of services--is maintained in spite of geographic separation (Litwak and Kulis 1987; Silverstein and Litwak 1993; Warnes 1994). This type of family (labeled the modified-extended family) has been heralded as an ideal intergenerational structure that meets the needs of dependent family members while serving the demand of a modern economy for a mobile labor force (Litwak 1985).

Families in North Wales and the U.S.

Taken together the evidence suggests that social and economic development have altered family structure and function, though perhaps not as completely and dramatically as some have claimed. In this article we examine whether older parents in two developed, predominantly English-speaking (Wales is bilingual, with English and Welsh as its official languages) but culturally different nations vary in the structure and function of their intergenerational relationships. In contrasting the parent-child relationships of older parents living in rural communities of North Wales with those of older parents living in the mostly urban U.S. we draw on the tradition of German sociological romanticism to highlight kinship differences between predominantly rural and predominantly urban societies (Tonnie 1955; Weber 1978). Ideal forms of rural society are those where kinship groups are bound together by territorial tribalism, economic interdependence and unquestioned family solidarity. These images of rural kinship are imbued with overtones of 'family farming', in which intergenerational solidarity is valued in order to achieve the transfer of duties and property to the next generation (Elder, Rudkin and Conger 1995; St. Cyr et al. 1994). By contrast, industrialized, mostly urban societies are characterized by diffuse ties, geographic separation, and independence of nuclear units across generations (Goode 1970).

While our description of rural kinship patterns invokes an ideal type of social organization characteristic of traditional society, contemporary Wales has been influenced by modern social and economic trends that have frayed the fabric of intergenerational solidarity. For instance, economic decline in quarrying areas of North Wales has resulted in the out-migration of young adults since the early 1900's (Morgan 1981). Together with the in-migration of older people from urban areas seeking tranquil retirement locations in the countryside (Green 1992), this pattern has caused imbalances in the age structure of some rural communities in Wales (McAllister 1990). Technological advances in agricultural production and the diminished role of family farming have further made it clear that the pre-industrial *gemeinschaft* is no longer a valid representation of family life in North Wales.

Yet research has consistently shown that social mores and folkways of rural regions persist as a residue of earlier forms of social and economic organization, most notably family farming (Elder, King and Conger 1996). Indigenous cultural values often leave their imprint on subsequent generations, long after the material conditions responsible for those values have altered. In Wales this imprint may derive from an early form of social organization in which families belonged to cliques based on religious identification (*buchedd*). At least three studies have noted that these cliques served a social control function by enforcing standards of behavior within the community (Day and Fitton 1975; Jenkins 1960; Plowman et al. 1961). The value for conformity to communal responsibility implicit in *buchedd* is likely to endure among contemporary Welsh--particularly among the elderly--as a preference for cohesive family ties (Halpern 1967). While research in Wales has shown that the physical distance between parents and adult children is greater in rural than in urban areas (Wenger 1984), there is evidence as well that illness is more likely to prompt social support to older parents living in rural areas (Scott and Roberto 1987). Such a pattern suggests that adult children are returning to their rural communities of origin for the purpose of providing care to ailing parents. Thus, we suggest that the effects of modernization in rural Wales may be mitigated by cultural values rooted in long-standing religious and cultural ideologies valuing filial piety, and by the (sometimes vestigial) importance of family forms of agricultural production.

Hypotheses

This analysis compares intergenerational relationships between elderly parents in rural communities in North Wales with elderly parents in Los Angeles, and with a national cross-section of elderly parents in the U.S. In contrast to the North Wales population, the two U.S. samples are derived from a population that is more industrially advanced, more highly concentrated in urban locations, and more geographically mobile, and tends more to value individualism over collectivism as a core social value--factors we predict may lead to weaker intergenerational relations. Therefore we derive our first set of hypotheses:

1. Based on dimensions of geographic distance, assistance, contact, and emotional closeness, elderly parents in North Wales will have more cohesive relationships with their adult children than will elderly parents in Los Angeles and nationally in the U.S.
2. Cross-national differences in intergenerational solidarity, predicted above, will be more pronounced for behavioral-structural dimensions (distance, contact, and assistance) than for emotional closeness.

The next set of predictions reflect our expectation that the dimensions of intergenerational solidarity are more confounded in North Wales than in the United States. Studies have found that proximity is the most important predictor of all types of exchanges between parents and adult children (Frankel and DeWit 1989; Hoyert 1991; Moss et al. 1985). There is evidence as well that older people in rural communities are embedded to a greater extent in local family networks and, thus are more likely than those in urban communities to receive assistance from local kin with whom they are closely tied (Wenger 1984, 1995). In contrast, we expect that intergenerational family ties of older people in the U.S. are more variegated and less likely to be consistent on dimensions of distance, support and emotional closeness (Silverstein and Bengtson 1997). Thus, we derive a second set of hypotheses:

3. Older parents in North Wales will be more likely than older parents in Los Angeles and those nationally in the United States to be simultaneously proximate and emotionally close to their adult children.
4. Older parents in North Wales will be more likely than older parents in Los Angeles and those nationally in the United States to receive support from adult children who are proximate and with whom they are emotionally close.

METHOD

In testing our hypotheses we contrast intergenerational relations in a sample of older parents in North Wales, with intergenerational relations of older parents in two U.S. samples. These three samples are described below.

Wales Sample

The sample of older Welsh is derived from the Bangor Longitudinal Study of Ageing (BLSA). The BLSA sample was drawn in 1979 from a cross-section of eight rural communities in North Wales, consisting of 534 people aged 65 and over. The sampling design recruited one elderly person from each household that contained at least one person aged 65 or over (in the four communities with a population less than 1000), and from 50% of elderly households (in the four communities with a population larger than 1000). The achieved sample was representative of the older population in the region. A structured survey was first administered in the homes of respondents in 1979 (for details see Wenger, 1984). The survey was repeated in 1983 for the survivors who were aged 75 and over in 1979, and again in 1987, 1991, and 1995 with all survivors. This article is based on the reports of 63 parents who responded to the 1995 survey about their relationships with 139 surviving children.

Los Angeles Sample

The University of Southern California's Longitudinal Study of Generations (LSOG) began in 1971 as a survey of 2044 individuals from over 300 distinct three-generation families. Grandparents from each lineage were drawn from a population of 840,000 members of a large Los Angeles prepaid Health Maintenance Organization (for details see Bengtson 1975). The sample pool was generally representative of white, economically stable, middle- and working-class families in southern California. Respondents included the grandparents (average age 67), their middle-aged children (average age 44), and their adult grandchildren (average age 19). Surveys consisted of self-administered mail-back questionnaires. This cross-sectional study evolved into a longitudinal investigation in 1985, when the original respondents were located again and sent questionnaires. Since 1985 these respondents have provided mail survey data every three years up to 1994. While mortality and illness decreased the size of the grandparent sample over time, the participation rate of eligible surviving participants has been over 90%. We select for this analysis 129 parents in the oldest generation who participated in the 1994 survey. Each parent responded to questions about his or her relationship with the adult child who was the first (or only) child in that family to respond to the original 1971 survey.

U.S. National Sample

Nationally representative data of elderly parents in the U.S. are from the Study of Intergenerational Linkages (SIL), a telephone survey undertaken in 1990 by the American Association of Retired Persons in collaboration with a research team from Harvard University and the University of Southern California. The SIL involved a sample of 1,500 adults aged 18-90 from randomly selected households in the 48 contiguous United States. Nursing homes and institutions were excluded from the sampling frame. One resident from each contacted household was randomly selected for interview. The main purpose of the survey was to ascertain the state of intergenerational relationships in American society (for details see Bengtson and Harootyan 1994). For the present analysis we select 102 respondents, ranging in age from 70 to 90, who were parents of surviving children at the time of the survey. Parents responded to questions about the nature of their relationships with their oldest children.

Contrasting the Samples

It is important to note that each sample differs from the others based on survey design and sampling method. We note differences with respect to survey year, sampling strategy, mode of data collection, and selection of reference children. Of particular concern are differences in the mode of selecting reference children. Whereas all children are considered in the Wales sample, only the first responding child is considered in the Los Angeles sample, and only the oldest child in the nationally U.S. sample. These differences highlight the importance of making triangulation across data-sets an essential strategy in this analysis.

In comparing characteristics across samples in Table 1, we note both similarities and differences on factors of age, gender, marital status, health status, and family size. The average ages across the samples range from 80 to 86 years, with the Welsh parent the oldest of the groups. Women are only slightly more prevalent in the Los Angeles and U.S. samples (74%), than they are in the Wales sample (68%). However, almost three-quarters of Welsh parents are not married compared with somewhat more than half of Los Angeles and U.S. parents. In examining health differences among the samples, we note that comparable health information is available only in the Los Angeles and Wales surveys. Two variables--self-rated health and ability to climb up and down stairs--are comparably measured across those two samples. The percentage of parents rating their health as excellent or good is higher in North Wales (49%) than in Los Angeles (34%), however both samples are almost equally likely to report difficulty in managing stairs (44% and 41%, respectively). Parents in both U.S. samples have more children on average than do parents in North Wales, however these differences are brought down substantially when removing the top 5% of outliers from the calculated means. Finally, the gender distribution of reference children varies between the Wales and Los Angeles samples; 47% of Welsh children are daughters, compared to 74% of Los Angeles children (information concerning gender of child was not available in the national U.S. data). This gender difference reflects more the inclusion criteria used by each sample for selecting reference children than it does national differences in family composition.

It should be noted that the factors shown to be different across the samples (most notably health of parent and child's gender) may bias estimates of "true" cross-national differences in intergenerational structure and function. We suggest that threats to the validity of our findings are dependent on 1) whether these factors predict dependent variables differently across samples, and 2) whether these factors are confounded with independent variables of theoretical interest. Thus, in contrasting North Wales and Los Angeles samples we will estimate equations with and without controlling for characteristics on which the samples differ, both as main effects and in interaction with sample membership.

Measures of Intergenerational Solidarity

In assessing parent-child relations we rely on Bengtson's paradigm of intergenerational solidarity, one of the few long-term efforts in family sociology to identify the principal dimensions of intergenerational family bonds (Bengtson and Schrader 1982; Mangen, Bengtson, and Landry 1988; Roberts, Richards, and Bengtson 1991). Four dimensions from this paradigm are used in our analysis: (1) structure--factors such as geographic distance which constrain or enhance interaction between family members; (2) association--frequency of social contact between family members; (3) affect--feelings of emotional intimacy between family members; and (4) function--exchanges of instrumental assistance between family members. These dimensions have a comparable dichotomous indicators across the three samples, and are operationalized as follows (category for high solidarity shown in parentheses): geographic proximity to child (less than one hour/less than 50 miles away); telephone or in-person contact with child (weekly or greater); emotional closeness with child (very close); and instrumental support from child (receives help with shopping, transportation, or household chores, or care when sick).

Statistical Method

In summary, our hypotheses propose that (1) solidarity of older parent-child relationships in North Wales is stronger than solidarity of older parent-child relationships in Los Angeles and nationally in the U.S., and (2) proximity and emotional closeness between Welsh parents and their children are more highly associated, and together more strongly predict whether instrumental assistance is received, than those dimensions in the relationships of older parents and children in Los Angeles and nationally in the U.S. In the first stage of the analysis we use bivariate chi-square tests to assess differences between samples on individual measures of intergenerational solidarity. In the second phase of the analysis we use hierarchical log-linear modeling with three-way interactions to test whether the association between geographic proximity and emotional closeness varies by sample membership, as well as whether these three factors (proximity, closeness, and sample) jointly influences support from children. Since our goal is to compare intergenerational family relationships in North Wales with those in the two U.S. samples, we estimate separate models for each of the two cross-national contrasts.

RESULTS

We present in Figure 1 the distribution of the four measures of solidarity in each of the three samples, and the results of pairwise chi-square tests for differences between samples. We find surprisingly few statistically significant differences between older Welsh parents and their American counterparts. However, several differences did emerge. As expected, we find that older parents in North Wales are more likely than older parents in Los Angeles to live closer to their children ($p < .10$). Where 60% of Welsh parents live within 50 miles of their children, only 49% of Los Angeles parents do so. No such difference is found with respect to older parents in the U.S. (using one hour travel time as a criterion value for distance). However, older parents in the Wales sample see their children significantly more often than older parents nationally in the U.S. Almost three-quarters (72%) of older Welsh parents are in contact with their children at least once a week, compared to slightly more than half (55%) of older parents in the U.S. Yet the most notable feature of Figure 1 is the consistency in the levels of solidarity, particularly emotional closeness and receipt of instrumental assistance. In all samples between 84% and 88% of older parents feel more than somewhat close to their children, and approximately one-third report receiving instrumental support from children.

Next we examine cross-national differences in the geographic boundedness of emotional intimacy in intergenerational relationships by testing whether older parents in North Wales are emotionally closer to their proximate children than are parents in the two U.S. samples. We use the technique of log-linear analysis to test a three-way interaction term signifying whether the strength of the association between proximity and emotional closeness is conditional on sample membership. The parameter estimates for the two- and three-way interaction models are found in Table 2. The first set of equations shows the results for the North Wales-Los Angeles contrast and the second set shows results for the North Wales-U.S. contrast. Since both contrasts reveal identical patterns, they will be discussed together.

As expected, the interactions between geographic proximity and emotional closeness are statistically significant in equations 1 and 3, implying that parents feel closer toward their more proximate children. The three-way interaction terms for the multiplicative of geographic proximity, emotional closeness, and sample membership, shown in equations 2 and 4, are also statistically significant. These coefficients signify that the positive association between proximity and intimacy is stronger in the North Wales sample than in the Los Angeles and the national U.S. samples. Thus, emotional and geographic closeness are more likely to be coincident in the intergenerational relations of older parents in North Wales than they are among older parents in both U.S. samples.

In order to better describe the meaning of these interactions, we sort the parents of each sample into groups formed by the cross-classification of geographic proximity and emotional closeness. Classification analysis leading to the development of typologies has been found to be a useful and informative approach for characterizing intergenerational relationships (Hogan et al. 1993; Silverstein and Bengtson 1997; Silverstein and Litwak 1993). While there are four groups possible in the cross-classification of the two dichotomous variables, we note that across the three samples less than five percent of parents fall into the category defined by emotional distance and geographic proximity. Therefore we derive a more parsimonious three group model: emotionally and geographically close relationships which are labelled tight-knit, geographically distant and emotionally close relationships which are labelled intimate-but-distant, and emotionally distant relationships (regardless of geographic proximity) which are labelled as strained.

Since geographic proximity is measured in the North Wales sample by both time (less than one hour) and distance (less than 50 minutes), we use both variables to derive two versions of tight-knit and intimate-but-distant types in this sample. The percentage difference between each version is small, at less than 1.5% for both types of intergenerational relations. Therefore we average their percentage representation in order to derive summary prevalence scores for each type that can be compared with corresponding scores in each of the U.S. samples.

Pairwise chi-square tests (not shown) reveal significant associations between intergenerational types and sample membership. Prevalence for each of the three intergenerational types is shown by sample in Figure 2. There are clear differences between samples, with nearly 3 of 5 (57%) older parents in North Wales having tight-knit relations with children, compared to less than half (43%) of older parents in Los Angeles and nationally in the U.S. (48%). The representation of relationships that are intimate-but-distant is substantially higher in Los Angeles (44%) and nationally in the U.S. (36%) than in North Wales (28%). Not surprisingly, the modal intergenerational category in predominantly urban Los Angeles is intimate-but-distant. Thus, the cross-national differences in intergenerational family structure of older parents reflects the capacity of older parents in the U.S., but particularly in Los Angeles, to maintain intimacy with children at a distance (Rosenmayr and Kockeis 1963). Finally, the representation of strained relations is similarly low in all three samples, ranging from 12.5% to 15.7% of all relationships.

Given evidence in the literature that daughters are the principal kin-keepers in the family (Hagestad 1986; Rossi 1993), we hypothesized that there would be differences in relationship type depending on the gender of the child. As expected we find that parents in Los Angeles are more than three times as likely to have strained relations with a son as with a daughter (26% compared to 8%), and about half as likely to have tight-knit relations with a son (32% compared to 47%). Surprisingly, we find that gender of child does not differentiate the type of relationship older parents in North Wales have with their children. That gender of child distinguishes intergenerational relationships in the Los Angeles sample only, suggests that the strong social integration of daughters in the older family (and weak integration of sons) may not be universal across Western cultures.

In the next stage of the analysis we address our final hypothesis that specifies cross-national differences in the recruitment of children for social support. Specifically, we predict that older parents in North Wales will tend more to rely on local and emotionally close children for support than will older parents in the U.S. samples. In testing this hypotheses we use logistic regression equations to predict whether or not instrumental support is received from each child. Equations are built hierarchically with higher order interaction terms successively introduced. In these equations we also control for the main effects of frequency of contact (weekly or more). By controlling for association we are better able to understand the unique roles played by geographic and emotional factors in determining social support within and across samples of older parents.

The three equations predicting support received are shown for the North Wales-Los Angeles pooled sample in Table 3. Each coefficient represents the marginal effect of that variable on the log-odds of receiving support. The first equation shows main effects only.

Coefficients reveal that older parents tend to receive support from children who are more proximate and with whom they have greater contact, suggesting that affective factors are less important than structural factors in determining the source of support.

The second equation in Table 3 adds two-way interactions terms. The interaction between geographic proximity and emotional closeness is near statistical significance, signifying that parents are more likely to receive support from children who are simultaneously closer than 50 miles and emotionally close. Of particular interest are the interactions of sample membership with geographic proximity and emotional closeness. Neither of these interactions are statistically significant, demonstrating that older parents in North Wales and those in Los Angeles are equally likely to receive support from a proximate child and from an emotionally close child. The third equation in Table 3 adds the three-way interaction term. This term is positive and statistically significant, signifying that older parents in North Wales are more likely than older parents in Los Angeles to receive support from children who live nearby and with whom they are also intimate.

Since the Los Angeles and Wales samples have comparable data on marital status, health, and gender of child(ren), we also estimate the third equation controlling for these factors--both as main effects and in interaction with sample membership (not shown). In sum, we find that less healthy parents (based on both self-rated health and difficulty with stairs) are more likely to receive support from children than are healthier parents, and that support is more likely to derive from daughters than from sons. However, unmarried parents were no more likely than married parents to receive support. Tests of interactions revealed no evidence that any of these factors predict support differently for each sample. Most important, the three-way interaction among geographic distance, emotional closeness and sample membership is still statistically significant when these factors are controlled. Thus, sample differences in health, marital status, and children's gender do not threaten the validity of our theoretical specification.

Equations predicting differences in intergenerational assistance between North Wales and national U.S. parents are found in Table 4. In the first equation we again demonstrate that greater proximity and greater contact increase the likelihood that support is received from children. The two-way interactions added in the second

equation are significant, revealing that older parents in North Wales are more likely to receive support from proximate children and from children with whom they have greater contact. The three-way interaction in the third equation is close to statistical significance, showing that the joint influence of proximity and emotional closeness on the likelihood of receiving support from children is more pronounced among older parents in North Wales than among older parents nationally in the U.S.

The most striking similarity across the two tables just discussed is the significance of the three-way interaction terms. In order to more fully appreciate their meaning, we present in Figure 3 the predicted odds ratios of receiving support in the Wales sample (relative to each of the two U.S. samples) conditioned on the three types of intergenerational relationships (discussed earlier), formed by the confluence of geographic proximity and emotional closeness. The odds ratios reveal cross-national differences in the types of relationship that are likely to be supportive. Among parents in who have tight-knit relationships with their children, those in North Wales are 14% more likely to receive support than those in Los Angeles, and 50% more likely than those nationally in the U.S. Further, older parents who are intimate-but-distant with their children are roughly two-thirds less likely (.41 and .34) to receive support in the North Wales sample than are similar parents in Los Angeles and national U.S. samples. Similarly, parents in North Wales who have strained relations with their children are almost one-quarter (.76 and .81) less likely to receive support when compared to parents with similar relations in the two U.S. samples. Taken together, these findings suggest that very old parents in North Wales tend to receive social support from children with whom they are better integrated--more intimate and more readily available--than do comparable parents in the U.S.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this investigation was to examine how the nature of intergenerational relationships in aging families is shaped by the economic, cultural-historical, and urban-rural contexts in which they are embedded. We hypothesized that differences in the structure of intergenerational family relationships between Wales and the U.S. would be consistent with known differences in national cultures and urban concentration. Drawing on Bengtson's paradigm of intergenerational solidarity, we contrasted parent-child relationships of older parents in North Wales with those in urban Los Angeles and in a nationally representative U.S. sample. Our hypotheses reflected the expectations that parent-child relations in North Wales are characterized by stronger intergenerational bonds than are those in the U.S., and that Welsh parents are more likely to derive support from children with whom they are more integrated based on structural and affectual dimensions of solidarity.

Surprisingly, the bivariate findings reveal more similarities than differences in the intergenerational relations of parents in North Wales and those in the U.S. As expected, we found that proximity to children were generally greater among parents in North Wales. However, affection for children was consistently high among parents of both nations, and social support was received from children at similar rates across the three samples. Thus, the greater geographic dispersion found in the intergenerational relationships of parents in both U.S. samples did not necessarily diminish the affective and supportive aspects of those relationships.

However, when geographic proximity and emotional closeness are considered simultaneously, we find that older parents in North Wales feel closer to their more proximate children than do those in the U.S.--portraying a neolocal, emotionally integrated model of intergenerational family life in Wales typically associated with rural kinship. The tendency of Welsh parents to maintain local and intimate ties with their children may be the residue that indigenous Welsh culture and its traditional farm economy has left on the social organization of the contemporary family in that nation. From another vantage point, we conclude from our findings that older parent-child relations in the U.S. are more variegated and more diffuse than those in Wales, such that structural and emotional aspects of intergenerational family ties are less likely to coincide. Thus, cross-national differences in intergenerational patterns in older families are consistent with known historical, cultural, economic, and social differences between the U.S. and North Wales.

In examining cross-national differences in the mobilization of social support from children, we found older parents in North Wales tended more to recruit support from children with whom they were both geographically and emotionally close. Thus, our evidence supports the hypothesis that older parent-child relationships in Wales are more likely than those in the U.S. to have a "locally-integrated" structure with respect to family support (Wenger, 1989). Since older parents in the U.S. are more likely to receive support from geographically dispersed and emotionally distant children, it is likely that norms of family responsibility may supersede structural and emotional barriers to care. How does the presence of such barriers influence the amount, type, and quality of support to older parents in the U.S.? We suggest the possibility that caregiver stress may be higher among children providing support to very distant parents or to parents with whom they are estranged. And although older parents in North Wales tend to receive support from proximate and intimate adult children, what of parents with no such children? Do they turn to other sources of support, such as relatives, friends and neighbors, or are their needs unmet? While the available data do not permit us to investigate these issues directly, they raise intriguing questions for future research.

Although our multi-sample research was made difficult by dissimilar study designs, the consistency of findings across two cross-national comparisons adds to our confidence that they reflect true national differences. Further, that parents in the Los Angeles sample are the most likely to be intimate-but-distant with children confirms our expectation that family dispersion is more endemic to urban regions; yet the fact that instrumental assistance received by parents in this type of relationship is substantially higher in Los Angeles than in North Wales refutes the widely held belief that geographic dispersion is an insurmountable barrier to intergenerational support. However, it is unclear why older parents in Los Angeles are only somewhat less likely than those in Wales to receive support from children with whom they are tight-knit, whereas parents in the national U.S. sample are substantially less likely to derive support from this type of relationship. One explanation is that respondents in the Los Angeles sample are closer to Welsh respondents in social class--both samples being predominantly working class in origin and thus, more likely to share traditional preferences for support. Another explanation is that tight-knit relationships of parents in Los Angeles (where out-migration during the recession of the late 1980s was relatively high) are maintained as such because they are sources of support. In other words, the selective mobility of children has yielded a relatively small, but committed group of children who have chosen to remain in the same city as their parents.

Our findings overall are quite robust with respect to differences in sampling methodology and measures across the surveys. Nevertheless, it is important to note that one key difference is that parents in the North Wales sample refer to multiple children while those in the two U.S. samples refer to only one child each. Comparisons between intergenerational relations in Wales with those in the other two samples may be misleading if responses about children by Welsh parents are correlated with family size. In order to test this for this possibility we randomly selected one child from each parent to determine if there were differences in solidarity scores when compared to the sample using multiple children. No such differences emerged, allowing us to reject the hypothesis that sampling multiple children is a source of bias in this analysis.

CONCLUSION

In summary, our findings point to intriguing cross-national differences in the configuration of parent-child solidarity that are consistent with known cultural and social differences between North Wales and the United States. In the more rural and agricultural area of North Wales, parent-child relations of older parents are more local and emotionally integrated than are similar relations in the U.S. These results point to the importance of incorporating into empirical models of family relations the cultural and national contexts in which families are embedded. By doing so, important policy considerations may be addressed, especially where the viability of family support to the elderly is being called into question (Banoob 1992; Hennon et al. 1991; Sinha 1991).

In an era of retrenchment in state supported services to the aged, families are expected to increasingly take responsibility for their elderly members. Yet, there is growing doubt that the family can effectively compensate for the loss of government services, in spite of social policies intended to promote filial piety (Chi 1995; Jiang 1995). These issues may be particularly salient in rural regions where the pace of social and economic modernization has been most rapid and where access to health care and social services is already more limited (Hennon et al. 1991; Lee & Lassey 1980; Lishner et al. 1996; Shi 1993; Weinert and Long, 1988). If social and economic changes erode the neolocal basis for filial association, will the rural Welsh family be able to adapt to new structural conditions or retract from providing care to its older members? Will the strength of normative prescriptions for family caregiving overcome the pull of urbanization and migration, as seems to be the case in the United States? Our expectation is that the family in rural Wales will be resilient to such social changes, as was apparent in the nineteenth century when a large out-migration of workers did not result in the abandonment of elderly parents due to the retention of select (mostly female) children (Patterson 1996).

In summary, we note both the challenges and promise inherent in cross-national research on the older family. Differences in research design, in sample composition, and in survey measures across studies certainly raise concern about the validity of direct comparisons between national cultures. We propose that repeated analyses over

multiple samples (including their eventual integration through meta-analysis) represents a promising means to overcome these limitations. The ratio between consistency and variability in findings across repeated cross-national comparisons will be valuable information for assessing the veracity of conclusions based on any one comparison. Finally, we note that because many factors on which nations vary cannot easily be operationalized or statistically controlled, causal inference in such studies is often problematic (Andrews 1989). Thus, the attribution of causal agency to national characteristics such as the degree of modernization (itself a multidimensional construct) must rely ever more so on careful consideration of the historical, cultural, and material conditions in each nation.

Nydegger (1983) has maintained that cross-cultural comparisons of family relations of the aged is made difficult because the definition of "family" is produced at the intersection of two basic dimensions of social organization: kinship and residence. We agree with that appraisal, and suggest that researchers and policy-makers in social gerontology be sensitive to expectations and preferences that lie along each dimension if they are to fully understand how cultural context and social change shape intergenerational family roles in old age.

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TABLE 1
Demographic characteristics of older parents in Wales, Los Angeles and U.S. samples

Legend for Chart: A - Characteristic B - Measure C - Sample: North Wales D - Sample: Los Angeles E - Sample: U.S. A B

Notes: a interpolated median from categorical data; b based on sample of 139 parent-child dyads.

TABLE 2
Log-Linear Estimates for Associations between Geographic Proximity and Emotional Closeness in Intergenerational Relations of Older Parents in North Wales, Los Angeles, and the U.S.

Legend for Chart: A - Variables B - Log-Linear Estimates for Pooled Samples: North Wales - Los Angeles C - Log-Linear Estimates for Pooled Samples: North Wales - Los Angeles

Notes: a $p < .05$; b $p < .01$; c $p < .001$

TABLE 3
Hierarchical Logistic Regression Equations Predicting Receipt of Assistance from Children by Older Parents in North Wales and Los Angeles

Independent Dependent Variable: Log Odds of Variables Receiving Instrumental Assistance

Notes: + $p < .10$; a $p < .05$; b $p < .01$; c $p < .001$

TABLE 4
Hierarchical Logistic Regression Equations Predicting Receipt of Assistance From Children by Older Parents in North Wales and the United States

Independent Variables Dependent Variable: Log Odds of Receiving Instrumental Assistance

Notes: + $p < .10$; a $p < .05$; b $p < .01$; c $p < .001$

FIGURE 1
Distribution of Parent-Child Solidarity Variables in Three Samples of Older Parents

Dimensions of solidarity												
North Wales	38	60	58	72	85	Los Angeles	35	49[1]	--	65	88 U.S. National	32

Note: 1. Receives instrumental help; 2. Lives less than 50 miles away; 3. Lives less than one hour drive away; 4. In contact at least weekly; 5. More than somewhat emotionally close.

a Consistent data not available for all three samples.

1 $p < .10$; 2 $p < .05$.

Statistical tests use the Wales sample as the reference group.

GRAPH: FIGURE 2 Prevalence of Parent-Child Relationship Types Based on Geographic Proximity and Emotional Closeness. Parent-Child Relationship Type. Note: Tight Knit: Proximate and emotionally close; Intimate but distant: Not proximate and emotionally close; Strained: Not emotionally close.

FIGURE 3
Odds Ratios for Receiving Support by Parent-Child Relationship Type

Tight	Intimate	Knit but distant	Strained	North Wales/Los Angeles	1
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