



European  
Research Area

# EUROPEAN POLICY BRIEF



## **KASS - Family, Kinship and State in Contemporary Europe**

Findings from an interdisciplinary research project  
with an anthropological agenda

March 2010

### SUMMARY

#### **Objectives of the research**

To measure the extent of mutual assistance between relatives, and the factors which influence it. The topic is timely, because of controversies regarding the respective welfare roles of 'the state' and 'the family', and because of new theoretical developments in anthropology and other social sciences.

#### **Scientific approach / Methodology**

Ethnographic research and collection of quantitative data on interactions within kinship networks at 19 field sites across Europe. Qualitative and statistical analysis of findings linked to other comparative survey data, and to historical analyses of family and state welfare in the countries concerned.

#### **New knowledge and/or European added value**

- (a) A "three-contract" (generational, partnership and individual-society) approach to the analysis of kinship ties.
- (b) Demonstration and confirmation of northwest-southeast and urban-rural contrasts in kinship patterns.
- (c) Ties with kin are more reliable practically than ties with friends and neighbours.

#### **Key messages for policy-makers, practitioners and civil society actors**

- (a) Old people usually have a rather low position in the welfare priorities of families themselves. State support is therefore vital.
- (b) State support for the elderly enables the latter to be net givers to their descendants in the family.
- (c) Economic analysis of likely policy outcomes must be linked to consideration of their compatibility with, and impact on, social relationships and (more durable) cultural values.

## OBJECTIVES OF THE RESEARCH

### Ethnographic research linked to public policies

Much of the debate about public family policies turns on the impact that these policies may have on the behaviour of the people affected – increasing ('crowding in') or decreasing ('crowding out') mutual assistance, labour-market participation by women, or birth-rates. Directly or indirectly these policies all evoke the questions of how much family members help each other, who does the helping, and why they do so (or why not). These are the central themes of our research.

The answers involve the interaction between public policies, economic conditions, personal motivations and cultural differences. They encompass the policy debates but extend beyond them, since families are central to people's sense of social identity and security, influencing – and responding to – the ways people understand and involve themselves in all kinds of community life. An important objective of the research has been to understand how explicit policy issues are connected to these wider implications of kinship.

## SCIENTIFIC APPROACH / METHODOLOGY

### Comparative scope

In order to obtain a cross-section of European societies – in terms of culture, social and economic structure, welfare state policies, and recent historical experience – we chose eight European countries: France, Sweden, Germany, Austria, Italy, Croatia, Poland and Russia. For each country we undertook a historical review of the development of family policies and trends in family life itself, since the foundation of the welfare state.

### Ethnographic studies

The centrepiece of our research consisted of ethnographic studies of 19 different localities (2 or 3 in each of the eight countries, always including both an urban and a rural location). These were combined with quantitative network interviews with a representative sample of respondents in each locality, in which we explored the extent of their knowledge of their kinship networks, and collected detailed information about both practical and social interactions with their relatives.

### Kinship network questionnaire

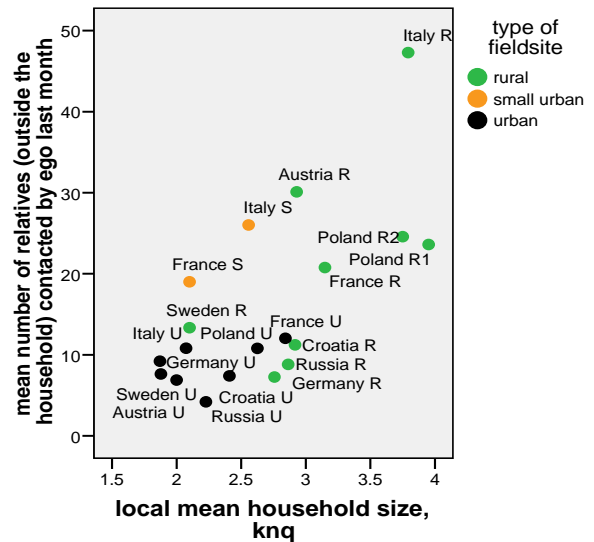
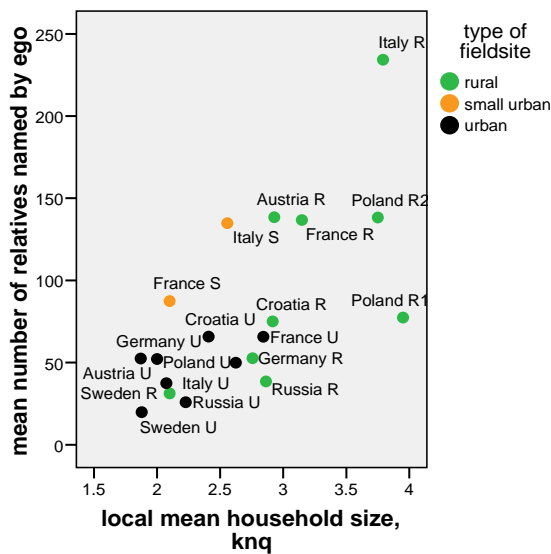
The collection, and subsequent statistical analysis of data from this *kinship network questionnaire*, and its close integration with ethnographic findings, constitutes the major methodological innovation of our study. The data it provided have been analysed at individual-level to assess hypotheses regarding knowledge, behaviour and motivation, and at locality-level to assess issues of cultural and economic differences, and of the integration of kinship into community life.

**2 examples of the Kinship network questionnaire**

Data: Average values from KNQ for each of 19 localities (sample of 570 interviews – approx. 30 per locality).

**Knowledge of kin by mean household size**

**Numbers of relatives contacted last month by mean household size**



Note the extensive knowledge of kin in some rural areas.

Confirmation that large households are a rural adaptation (or small households an urban one).

**Validation and comparison**

In order to check how far our locality-level data was also nationally representative, we have drawn where possible on national statistics and data from comparative social surveys, incl. the *European Values Survey* and the *International Social Survey Programme (ISSP)*. It has been most valuable to compare our findings on intergenerational help with those from the *Survey of health, aging and retirement in Europe – (SHARE)*.

## NEW KNOWLEDGE AND EUROPEAN ADDED VALUE

**Patterns of kinship**

The role of kinship ties in practical and social life can be thought of in terms of three implicit contracts.

**Three types of implicit contracts**

- (1) **The contract between successive generations** is a source of practical, emotional and financial support – both on a regular basis and as an insurance for times of crisis such as illness, unemployment, divorce and bereavement. Support from the grand-parental generation for their own children's parenting can greatly assist the reconciliation of parenting and employment, and people in middle and later-middle age are an important source of care for the dependent elderly.
- (2) **The contract between reproductive partners** (and each other's family of origin) includes the division of productive, child-rearing and domestic labour, as well as the ways in which the partners support each other's social identities.
- (3) **The contract with the community as a whole** goes beyond the formal obligations and rights resulting from legal citizenship. It also includes the obligations and pleasures of participating in social and ritual life, sometimes in one's own right and sometimes as a representative of one's family.

**North-West and South-East ways of living together**

Our research has identified two broad ways in which the three contracts are combined in contemporary Europe.

- In one combination, typical of **northern and western Europe**, the contract between the individual and society as a whole is direct, the conception of society is geographically quite wide, and family life is centred on the reproductive couple. In this combination, intergenerational ties are relatively down-played – though, nevertheless, substantial amounts of help flow from parents to adult children. Co-residence of different adult generations is rare.
- In the other combination, typical of **southern and eastern Europe**, intergenerational ties are emphasised, and the link between reproductive partners is correspondingly down-played. Features of the model are highly distinct gender roles, a conception of social identity in which the individual relates to the community at large as a member of an extended family, and a community that is geographically concentrated enough for each individual's family background to be generally known. Intergenerational co-residence (or close residence) is common, and allows for extensive flows of help in both directions.

### ***Systematic urban-rural contrasts across Europe***

In practice most of the nineteen communities that we studied in depth fall somewhere between the two patterns described above. However, they do so in a systematic way, since the different aspects of the models vary together. Though these arrangements have deep cultural roots they are not impervious to economic factors. The second pattern is adapted to family-based production (most notably in agriculture) in which the moral debt of the younger generation for the inheritance of the family capital underpins the relatively high status of members of the older generation. The first pattern is better adapted to modern capitalism, in which most families do not own and transmit their own productive capital, and in which each person ideally enters the labour market in his or her own right, irrespective of family ties.

Recent economic changes, specifically the concluding phases of Europe's centuries-long process of urbanisation and industrialization, and the spread of a knowledge- and service-based economy, have moved communities in all parts of Europe further towards the individualistic pole, but have not abolished the long-standing differences between European macro-regions. The result in northwest Europe has been a more flexible and less gender-biased version of the existing system. Kinship ties in the south and east remain more formal, but the system is coming under strain in ways that are described below.

### **The roots of individual behaviour towards kin**

Social systems become real through the behaviour of individual people as they interact with one another, so a full understanding of the social patterns described above requires an account of individual cognition and motivation and of the way these interact with material and cultural factors.

#### ***Motivation***

There is a nearly universal inclination on the part of members of older generations to help younger relatives. This applies when parents help their young children, but continues after those children have grown up, and are themselves founding households and having children. The reverse tendency, of younger relatives to help older relatives, exists but is much weaker. The readiness to help falls off rapidly with the increase of both genealogical and (in the case of physical help) geographical distance between the relatives concerned.

Practical convenience is also a factor. In rural areas where relatives may share an interest in a family farm, and where services are less accessible, relatives tend to help each other more than in towns.

Reciprocity is an important factor in relationships between relatives – people are much more likely to help specific relatives if the individuals concerned have also been helpful to them. However, a strict balance between favours given and received is not expected between kin, and major imbalances can persist for longer than would be acceptable between unrelated neighbours.

Not all interactions between kin are motivated by practical concerns, and social contacts and ritual exchanges between kin typically extend some way beyond those who are likely to be involved in exchanges of practical assistance. This behaviour, which is not obviously rational in utilitarian terms, appears to strengthen the ties that link families together into wider communities.

### **Cognition**

How widely people in different localities typically draw the boundaries of the practically effective 'entourage family', and how much help its members actually give each other, depends in part on the working out of the practical motivations described above in different economic circumstances. But differences in the extent and intensity of practical help also reflect the cognitive schemes that people in different communities apply to kinship ties – manifested most obviously in distinct systems of kinship terminology, but also in residence patterns and other symbolically charged aspects of behaviour.

### **Culture and practice: correlations and strains**

The connection of kinship practices with both economic circumstances and cognitive schemes suggests that there might be a long-term tendency for economic arrangements and cognitive schemes to adapt to one another. Consistently with this we find

1. that kinship terminologies associated with localised extended family systems are characteristic of the countries which still have relatively high proportions of their population in agriculture.
2. that practically generated changes in kinship behaviour can lead to differences in cognitive schemes. For instance, there are often cultural as well as behavioural differences between urban and rural areas in the same country, and the KASS field studies have revealed examples of cultural changes in the course of rural-to-urban migration as well as between generations in situations of economic change.

At the same time one might expect strains to emerge if rapid economic developments lead to changes in practical arrangements that outrun the speed at which cognitive schemes can be adjusted. Strains of this kind underlie some aspects of contemporary fertility patterns. For urban areas birth rates are currently *lowest* in those countries whose culture is marked by large families, emphasis on distinct gender roles, and a tradition of spatial closeness among kin. There are also some indications in our data that in earlier decades (though no longer) fertility in rural areas was *highest* in countries characterised by kinship contracts of this kind. The reasons for the low urban birth rates observed today might be either a sense of cognitive dissonance between cultural norm and pragmatic reality, or the actual inconvenience of operating traditional kinship contracts that fail to allow for the practical opportunities and constraints of contemporary urban life.

## KEY MESSAGES FOR POLICY-MAKERS

**Role of policy-making:  
Looking back and ahead**

Viewed historically *ex post* public family policies can be seen as largely, though not entirely, endogenous to the kinship systems of the countries in question. However, viewed *ex ante* by policy makers hoping to make a difference to the lives of their fellow citizens, there is always the possibility of alternative choices that may bring different outcomes.

Looking at the matter *ex post* our historical findings show that European states have typically acted

- to deal with emergent problems (poverty, economic needs for new education provisions, low birth rates),
- but seek to do so in a way that preserves the existing system of kinship contracts.
- Sometimes, however, they act to change the system. They may do so deliberately, as in the case of some communist regimes. More typically however, change comes as the unintended result of some other policy (e.g. on education).

Looking *ex ante* highlights the choices facing contemporary European governments as a result of the ever increasing penetration of the individualistically based knowledge economy, and of current low fertility rates. We review the possibilities in the light of the causal relationships analysed in the previous section. Our concern is with the broad lines of policy rather than with the precise calibration of specific measures.

**Welfare of old people**

One major priority is the *welfare of old people*. The recommendations here are clear, and apply to societies with both major configurations of kinship contracts. Old people are particularly at risk because families' own priorities generally favour provision for the young. As the ratio of younger people to older people declines the pressure on the limited private willingness to help older relatives will become more severe. Pensions therefore continue to be a priority and, because old people are likely to pass some of the resulting income to younger family members, there will be additional knock-on benefits to younger family members, which will themselves entail reciprocal help to the old people. The overall effect is thus likely to include some strengthening of family relationships (i.e. a '*crowding in*' effect).

**Policies for fertility?**

A second major priority for contemporary European family policy is *fertility*. State benefits can play a valuable role here by

1. reducing the risk of poverty for child-bearing families
2. providing assistance that enables employment-oriented mothers to continue working.

However, since the collapse of communism, measures of this kind have only been implemented systematically in northern and western Europe, while in southern and central-eastern countries it

has been feared that they would upset the intergenerational and gender contracts in the existing kinship system. The earlier analysis of the feedback relation between practice and culture suggests that these fears may be reasonable. However, these countries now face very low fertility simultaneously with increasing demands for gender equality and female labour force participation.

### Policy options in familistic societies

The policy options currently facing governments in the more familistic societies appear to be

1. to implement state-provided support for parents, and for the reconciliation of motherhood and employment in particular. This policy may not be as effective as it is in north-west Europe if parents are still influenced by a feeling that help *ought* to be provided from within the family. But if it *is* effective the resulting changes in practice will undermine further the pre-existing system of intergenerational and gender contracts.
2. to use state resources to fund help by family members themselves (e.g. subsidies to grandparents who help with child care, or to mothers who stay at home to look after their children). Such a system would support existing kinship structures. But, if part of the reason for lower fertility in south and east Europe is a reluctance of potential mothers – educationally socialised into a system of individualistic work relationships – to re-enter the world of family obligations, subsidising family relationships will not be enough to overcome their reluctance.

The need for state support to parents in one form or other is unlikely to disappear unless economic changes lead to the re-emergence of an economy based on local relationships. We mention this possibility, because something of this kind does appear more common in parts of southern Europe than in the northwest. However, its importance does not appear to be increasing, and so offers little realistic hope that systems of extended and localised kinship relationships can become self-sustaining. In practice, families in both parts of Europe are likely to be increasingly dependent on state support in order to achieve adequate levels of welfare and reproduction.

PROJECT IDENTITY

**Coordinator**

Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology (DE)  
Patrick Heady - <http://www.eth.mpg.de/>

**Consortium**

- Max Planck Institute for Demographic Research Rostock (DE)  
Laura Bernardi - <http://www.demogr.mpg.de/>
- Karl-Franzens-University Graz - Centre for the Study of Balkan Societies (AT)  
Hannes Grandits - <http://www.uni-graz.at/>
- University of Vienna (AT)  
Peter Schweitzer - <http://www.univie.ac.at/>
- Austrian Institute for Family Studies, Vienna (AT)  
Johannes Pfliegerl - <http://www.oif.ac.at/>
- Institute for Ethnology and Folklore Research, Zagreb (HR)  
Jasna Capo Zmegac - <http://maief.ief.hr/en/>
- Université Paris X-Nanterre (FR)  
Martine Segalen - <http://www.u-paris10.fr/>
- Université de Franche-Comté Besancon (FR)  
Sophie Chevalier - <http://www.univ-fcomte.fr/>
- University of Cologne (DE)  
Michael Schnegg - <http://www.uni-koeln.de/index.e.html>
- University of Siena (IT)  
Pier Giorgio Solinas - <http://www.unisi.it/>
- Radboud University Nijmegen (NL)  
Hans Marks - <http://www.kun.nl/>
- Adam Mickiewicz University Poznan (PL)  
Michal Buchowski - <http://www.amu.edu.pl/>
- Moscow School of Social and Economic Sciences (RU)  
Alexander Nikulin - <http://www.msses.ru/english/>
- Södertörns högskola, Baltic and East European Graduate School (SE)  
David Gaunt - <http://webappo.web.sh.se/>
- Nicolaus Copernikus University Torun (PL)  
Andrezej Kaleta - <http://www.uni.torun.pl/en/>
- Georg-August-University Göttingen (DE)  
Heidi Rosenbaum - <http://www.uni-goettingen.de/>
- University of Udine (IT)  
Gianpaolo Gri - <http://www.uniud.it/>
- University of Milano-Bicocca (IT)  
Simone Ghezzi - <http://www.unimib.it/>
- Catholic University of Lublin (PL)  
Leon Dyczewski - <http://www.kul.lublin.pl/uk/>

## EUROPEAN POLICY BRIEF

**EC contact**

Marc Goffart; e-mail: [marc.goffart@ec.europa.eu](mailto:marc.goffart@ec.europa.eu)

---

**Funding scheme**

Specific Targeted Research Project (STReP), funded under the 6th Framework Programme of the European Community, Thematic Priority 7 - Citizens and Governance in a Knowledge-based Society

---

**Duration**

May 2004 – April 2008 (48 months)

---

**Budget**

EU contribution: € 1.149.999

---

**Website**

[www.eth.mpg.de/kass](http://www.eth.mpg.de/kass)

---

**Further reading**

- Patrick Heady, Hannes Grandits, Martin Kohli, Peter Schweitzer (eds) Family, Kinship and State in Contemporary Europe (3 Volumes). Frankfurt (Campus Verlag) 2010 (In Press)
  - Heidi Rosenbaum, Elisabeth Timm: Private Netzwerke im Wohlfahrtsstaat. Familie, Verwandtschaft und soziale Sicherheit im Deutschland des 20. Jahrhunderts. Konstanz (UVK) 2008.
  - Pflegerl, Johannes; Christine Geserick: Kinship and Social Security. A social history for the 20th century. Innsbruck (Studien Verlag) 2008.
- 

**Related website**

[www.eth.mpg.de/kass/eu](http://www.eth.mpg.de/kass/eu)

---

**For more information**

[heady@eth.mpg.de](mailto:heady@eth.mpg.de)

---