

Field Studies in the Family Album

How strong are the ties that bind families in Europe? To answer this question, around 30 scientists set out on field studies in eight European countries. The coordinator of this large-scale project was **Patrick Heady** of the **Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology** in Halle.

TEXT **BIRGIT FENZEL**

The study is entitled *Kinship and Social Security* (KASS). “When and why can one expect relatives to offer one another support and practical assistance?” asks Patrick Heady, describing the goals of the project that was financed with a grant from the European Union’s 6th Research Framework Programme. As an anthropologist and experienced statistician, he is now in a position not only to present the largest ethnographic study yet conducted on this issue, the results of which are compiled in three volumes, but also to provide the political discussion surrounding the future of the welfare state with long-overdue factual support.

After eight months of field work in a suburb of Berlin and a rural community in Brandenburg, anthropologist Tatjana Thelen of the Max Planck Institute in Halle has come to the sober conclusion that “the ideal of the extended family as a synonym for perfect harmony in which grandparents, parents and children live happily togeth-

er and mutually support one another is a persistent myth.” Together with colleagues Astrid Baerwolf and Tilo Grätz, she has been looking closely at people’s social networks.

STRONG SENSE OF WILLINGNESS TO HELP FAMILY MEMBERS

Marzahn-Hellersdorf and Glindow were among the 19 localities in various parts of Sweden, France, Poland, Austria, Germany, Italy, Croatia and Russia selected by Heady and his colleagues to represent Europe’s cultural, historic and social landscape. In addition to the 30 scientists working the field, a further 20 KASS staff members were employed in data analysis, historical research and theoretical work.

The good news: People within a given social environment – and especially within their own family – still display a marked willingness to help one another. But in the opinion of the researchers, that doesn’t mean that all’s well. This solidarity, which is grounded in European culture and tra-

ditions, is increasingly coming under pressure as a result of demographic changes and economic developments. Not least among these factors is the clear trend, reflected in the official national statistics in all eight countries, toward a rising number of single-person households.

“While there may well be a variety of causes, it is hard to deny that this also means a decline in family solidarity,” says the KASS coordinator. As the study clearly shows, family cohesion is strongest where the proportion of close relatives who live together is highest.

The KASS study began some eight years ago. Anthropologist Patrick Heady and historian Hannes Grandits of Berlin’s Humboldt University were discussing the idea of investigating the kind of social security arrangements that families offer their members. Given the debate about the cost and value of the benefits provided by a modern welfare state to protect those in fundamental need, it was clear to both of them that this was a vital issue – and not just from a scientific perspective.



Heady and Grandits, who at the time was still working at the University of Graz, had just a few weeks to submit an application for EU Research Framework Programme funding. At the same time, they also set about trying to recruit colleagues at various international universities and institutions to join their project. "The idea was well received because, by investigating kinship networks from the perspective of practical assistance, we were looking to discover something new," Heady recalls. With the green light from Brussels, the teams started work in May 2004.

Their findings are sufficient to fill three large volumes, packed with the results of detailed historical, demographic, sociological and ethnographic studies. Viewed from a variety of perspectives, it becomes clear how economic changes and new forms of part-

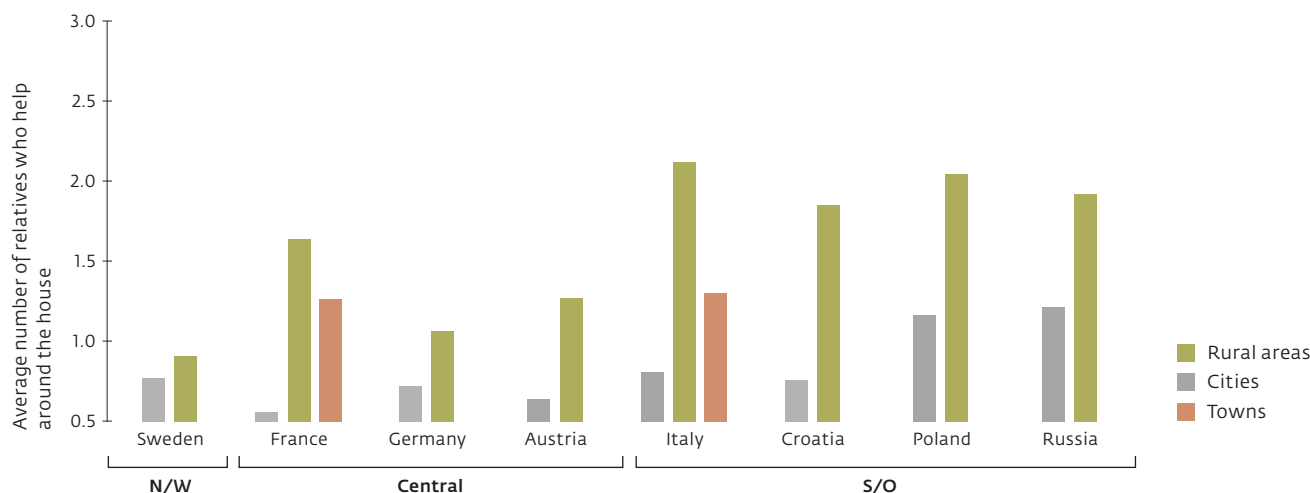
nership, declining birth rates and an aging society are altering both our image of the family and its role in providing social security. Studies documenting the changes in family policy since the introduction of the welfare state and alterations in demographic and family structures in each of the eight selected countries provide a framework for the project.

At its core, however, lie the field studies in which researchers used ethnographic methods to closely examine the family lives of a representative sample of participants in each of the chosen locations. In quantitative network interviews with standardized questionnaires, they gathered comparison data ranging from the size of the extended family, the geographic distance separating family members and the frequency of personal contact and

support of all kinds. Observations of daily life and details of other conversations rounded off the family image.

TOWN AND COUNTRY DIFFER WIDELY

Each of the threads of this major project led back to the institute in Halle where Heady and his colleagues fed the masses of data from the 19 research locations into their computers. Having selected at least one rural and one urban location in each country, they were able to tell by direct comparison whether and to what extent the prevailing political, economic or social conditions had affected the family lives of town and country dwellers. The graphics that depict the results offer a clear picture of how families live and function in various regions of present-day Europe. >



The contrast is striking: Far more relatives help each other in rural areas than in the city. Italy and Poland lead the field with an average of more than two relatives intensively helping around the house in one way or another. In Italy and France, family solidarity is strong even in small towns.

Comparing the data on the sizes of family networks, the researchers were struck by a major contrast: in terms of both physical proximity and the exchange of goods, favors and money between relatives, the figures for Italy, Croatia, Poland and Russia were far higher than those for Sweden, Germany, Austria and France. “As a result, we can distinguish between two macro-regions,” says Heady.

In fact, the KASS researchers found the great differences between urban and rural areas in the same country just as striking. Among other findings, they established that rural families everywhere are larger than in towns and cities. It was also clear that children in the country frequently prefer to stay close to their parents. The same applies to the rest of the extended family, who in turn also tend to live in closer proximity in the country than in towns. “In rural areas, 14 percent of family members who are not part of an immediate household live less than a kilometer away,” Patrick Heady explains. In towns, the figure is just about 8 percent. Extending the distance to ten kilometers revealed a proportion of 46 percent in the country, compared with 31 percent in town.

This distribution also corresponds with the number of households in which children, parents and grandparents all live under one roof. In the localities with the highest numbers of

three-generation households, most relatives lived within a radius of ten kilometers. The highest figures were recorded where families were engaged in farming and agricultural businesses. In these cases, the proportion of three-generation households came in at 34 percent, compared with 6 percent among non-agricultural workers.

SOLIDARITY INCREASES WITH PROXIMITY

By international comparison, Croatia and Poland had the most three-generation households. Even in urban areas, their figures were higher than in rural parts of Sweden or Germany. The urban figures for France, Germany, Austria and Sweden, with families in this category numbering around zero, make the macro-regional difference even clearer.

Of course quantity does not always equate with quality; but as far as the measure of support that family members offer one another is concerned, the equation is entirely valid. “Solidarity is simpler when relatives live not far from one another,” says the KASS coordinator. Incidentally, this applies equally to both geographic and genealogical distances. “We know from our network interviews that the closer the connection is, the greater the willingness is to provide support.”

The northwest-southeast gradient that separates the macro-regions is also

evident in the distribution of patterns of marriage. As a general trend, those who live in rural areas prefer to marry local partners, but even here there are differences between the macro-regions. In Sweden, for example, it is not common to choose a partner from the same neighborhood, either in town or in the country. In contrast, spatial endogamy is widespread in Southern and Eastern Europe, especially in village communities.

By marrying partners with ties to the same “home area,” couples contribute to the continuity and consolidation of their local community – or as a male resident of the Polish village of Dziekanowice pointed out in a KASS interview: “Strictly speaking, we’re practically all one and the same family here.” In some respects, the man was quite right, say Michał Buchowski and Agata Stanisł, who researched families in the Polish regions for KASS. “Many of the kinship networks in this village either overlapped or were directly interlinked.” Local patriotism in the marriage stakes brings distinct pragmatic benefits: when family and friends are close at hand, help is not far off in any situation.

Like many other relationships, family bonds are partly based on the principle of mutuality. Within the family, however, favors are exchanged on a somewhat more generous basis. Summarizing the quantitative results of the

network interviews, Patrick Heady explains: “Any imbalances are more likely to be tolerated between relatives than in the case of strangers.”

A BALANCE OF GIVE AND TAKE

Many of those interviewed expressed a wish for a balance between giving and taking. In fact, however, it was apparent that the willingness of the younger generation to fulfill their part of the bargain is not uniformly great. “Depending on context and culture, the sense of balance may be expressed either as a need to compensate for support received, or as a desire on the part of parents not to be a burden.”

Tatjana Thelen and her team conducting field studies in Glindow and Marzahn were able to observe how many people find themselves caught between the ideal and reality. Those who initially declined to be interviewed on the grounds that “I have no family” proved to be particularly informative. When they finally agreed to participate, it became evident that what many of them meant was that they lived alone or that all their relatives were deceased. However, it also often emerged that they found their relationships with relatives to be inadequate.

Tatjana Thelen recalls an elderly woman who complained of a lack of contact with her family and an absence of attention. “I really don’t know why I bothered bringing up five children,” she told the researcher. In return for bringing them up, she apparently expected a quid pro quo. And yet the study shows that people of her generation attach particular value to their independence. The elderly participants emphasized again and again that if it

came to it, they did not expect to be nursed by their children, nor by their grandchildren.

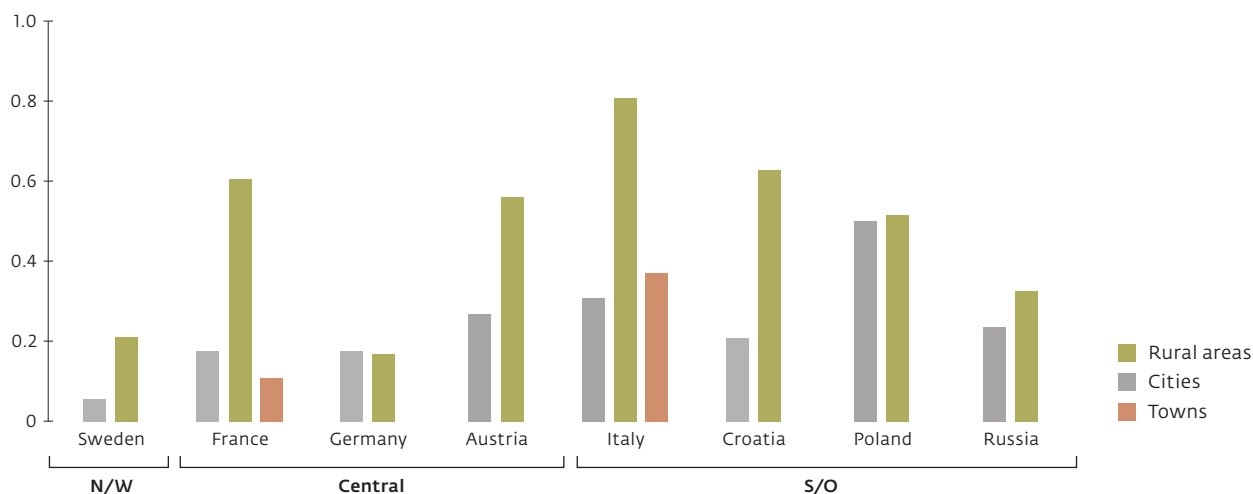
The emphasis on independence is characteristic not just of the locations in Germany, Patrick Heady believes, but also of all the countries of the northwestern macro-region – even though for many elderly people this attitude is accompanied by great sorrow. However, this conflict was not experienced by the older generation in Italy

and Poland. “The pressure there falls far more on their adult children.” Once again, this is far more pronounced in rural areas.

The image of rural locations in Poland painted for KASS by Michał Buchowski and Agata Stanisław is typical. For many families there, the grandparents are firmly integrated into everyday life. They live either under the same roof or close by, and the grandmother is virtually a national institu-



Many hands make light work: Cohesion is markedly stronger in the country than in the city – due not least to the fact that relatives in rural areas live closer to one another than in cities.



Marriage patterns vary: People in rural communities prefer to marry local partners. This spatial endogamy is widespread in southern and eastern parts of Europe. The figures indicate the ratio of couples where both partners were born a maximum of ten kilometers from their present home.

tion due to the frequency with which she acts as a surrogate kindergarten. Their pensions, too, are valued as a second household income. To quote a saying often heard in Dziekanowice: "A pensioner in the house is better than a cow."

In return, the grandparents expect their children to take care of them should the need arise. This obligation is backed up by considerable normative pressure. The price of neglect is social ostracism. This seems to work: not a single inhabitant of Dziekanowice lives in a nursing home. This could be

due to the fact that, for the majority, such an alternative is too expensive. More probable, however, is that respect, moral obligation and the strong emotional ties between the generations play a decisive role.

GIFTS ACT AS SOCIAL GLUE

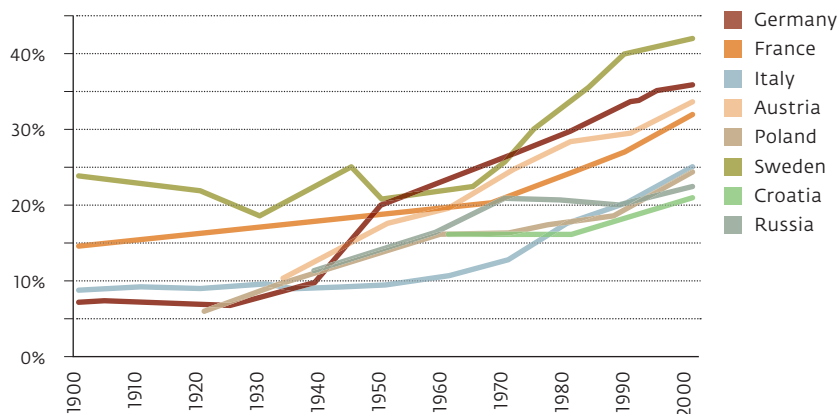
The research conducted in rural Italy by Carlo Capello and Nevill Colclough reveals a similar picture. There, gifts of all kinds, as well as financial and practical support, act as the social glue that bonds the generations. Reporting from

Tramonti, a small community in the province of Salerno, the researchers note that "the social obligation to help their children to aspire to a home of their own is closely associated with the accepted norm that the children will take care of their parents."

As in the case of child rearing, it is predominantly the female members who are ultimately left to fulfill this duty. From this perspective, family life in rural Italy seems much the same now as it was a century ago, especially with regard to the division of roles between the sexes. However, it has long since ceased to be the case that countries with strong family ties have high birth rates. On the contrary: these countries now have the lowest rates of all.

The scientists believe that this can be only partially explained by changing economic conditions. The cost of raising children and helping them on their way to a secure future is a consideration that causes many Tramontesi to limit their number of children. The high value accorded to children both by families and by society encourages the present generation to have fewer offspring in order to be able to provide them with the optimum attention and material support.

Yet this behavior is by no means as altruistic as it may at first appear. "The ability to give children a good start in life, assuring them of better career opportunities and higher spending power,



Clear trend: In all of the countries studied in the KASS project, the number of single-person households is rapidly rising. This, in turn, means a decline in family solidarity. Cohesion is strongest wherever a maximum number of close relatives live together.

er, also means that the parents, too, enjoy greater prestige," the researchers discovered. While it may appear rational at an individual level, this strategy has fatal consequences for society. Falling birth rates have long been a problem facing social policy makers, not just in Italy. If things don't change in the foreseeable future, as the high birth rate cohorts grow ever older and the resulting burden falls upon a decreasing number of shoulders, the contract between the generations is likely to come under pressure.

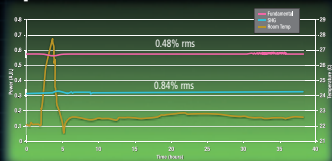
Developments in the countries of the northwestern macro-region would appear to indicate that political measures to protect families with children

against poverty and encourage a balance between careers and family life are having a positive effect on birth rate statistics. However, Heady questions whether such family policy instruments would work in the same way in Italy, Croatia and the other countries in their group. "The effect might be to undermine the existing systems of family solidarity." It is this concern that has so far deterred governments in these countries from extending their support for families.

Nevertheless, the KASS researchers are not content with simply presenting an inventory of data. In their third volume, edited by Patrick Heady together with family sociologist Martin

Kohli, Professor at the European University Institute in Florence, they couple the political implications of their findings with some suggestions. One of these relates directly to the universal preference for reciprocity in interpersonal relations. The idea is to improve the financial support for the grandparents' generation. This would not only add to the material independence enjoyed by elderly people, it would also enable them to strengthen their relationships with their children and grandchildren by providing generous gifts. Gifts, after all, are the bricks and mortar of friendship. As the study shows, this is equally true of family relationships. ◀

Industry Leading Power. Guaranteed Stability. Spitfire® Ace™



Long Term Stability

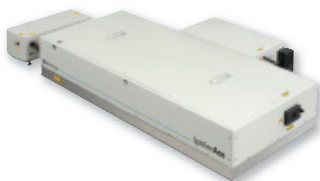
Spitfire Ace long term SHG and fundamental power stability, $\Delta T > 6^\circ\text{C}$



Pointing Stability

Spitfire Ace beam pointing performance, $\Delta T > 6^\circ\text{C}$

We understand that measuring ultrafast dynamics requires an outstanding research team and reliable measurement tools. And when your experiments become increasingly noise sensitive with lower signal levels, data acquisition becomes more challenging. The new Spitfire® Ace™ ultrafast amplifier overcomes these challenges by providing rock solid operation, low optical noise and the industry's most stable output – guaranteed under varying environmental conditions and over extended time periods.



- Revolutionary XPert™ stabilization package
- More than 5.0 W of output power
- Superior mode quality ($M^2 < 1.3$)
- Digital synchronization electronics
- Designed and supported by the most knowledgeable ultrafast engineering and service teams

For more information, call us or visit

www.spectra-physics.com/Spitfire-Ace

Newport Spectra-Physics GmbH

Guerickeweg 7 – 64291 Darmstadt – Germany

Phone: +49 (0) 61 51 / 708 – 0 • Fax: +49 (0) 61 51 / 708 – 217 or – 950

E-Mail: germany@newport.com

© 2011 Newport Corporation.



Spectra-Physics
A Newport Corporation Brand