

Close but Far Away: Intergenerational Relationships Between Retirement Migrants and Their Adult Children

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Abstract

The dispersal of families over greater distances has altered intergenerational relationships between parents and adult children. International retirement migrants migrate away from their children in a life stage that is often characterized by more exchanges of support. Prior studies have described retirement migrants' family ties, but often using non-representative samples and without linking their findings to factors that could explain variations. We collected data from a representative sample of Dutch nationals aged 66-90 who were born in the Netherlands and migrated after age fifty. We consider three types of intergenerational solidarity: (1) face-to-face contact, (2) digital contact and (3) emotional closeness. We explain differences in the parent-adult child relationships of retirement migrants by examining contact opportunities, contact needs, family structures, cultural norms and migration specific factors. Ordered logistic regression models show that people who live at a greater geographical distance and with a lower socioeconomic status are less likely to have more frequent face-to-face contact with adult children, but they are not less emotionally close. Female and married retirement migrants were more likely to have stronger parent-child ties than males and divorced or remarried migrants. This study provides important insights into transnational family ties and gendered kinship practices.

1. Introduction

Geographic proximity between parents and adult children is a measure of past and current intergenerational relationships, but also a conditioning factor for future relationship opportunities. Geographical distance affects some key aspects of intergenerational family solidarity, such as the frequency and type of contact between family members of different generations (Bengtson & Roberts, 1991). Parents who live at greater geographical distance from their adult children have fewer exchanges of support than people who live in close proximity (Hank, 2007; Knijn & Liefbroer, 2006; Mulder & van der Meer, 2009). The exchange of instrumental support has been shown to bind families in geographical locations (Hünteler & Mulder, 2020). However, advances in technologies and mobility have facilitated and encouraged the maintenance of family ties over longer distances and across international borders (Levitt & Jaworsky, 2007; Schiller et al., 1992). In other words, geographical proximity may no longer be as important to maintain close family relationships as before (Baldassar et al., 2016).

In this article, we examine the case of international retirement migrants. Older adults who migrate to new countries in retirement often move away from their support network in the country of origin. Their migration affects the opportunity structure for the exchange of support with adult children. Most retirement migrants have fewer possibilities for interaction with children, even though close kin relationships, like the parent-child relationship, gain relative importance in later life (English & Carstensen, 2014; Neyer & Lang, 2003; Sander et al., 2017). By studying intergenerational relationships in a new family context, we gain a better understanding of the opportunity structure of interaction and to whom it matters more than others. More specifically, we investigate the research question: How do retirement migrants maintain intergenerational ties with their adult children and what explains variation in these relationships? The case of retirement migration could provide important insights into how people negotiate the exchange of family support over longer distance in a digitalized world.

Many studies have examined intergenerational relationships (Bengtson & Roberts, 1991; Silverstein et al., 2002; Szydlik, 2008), but studies on intergenerational relationships of retirement migrants are scarce. Prior studies that have examined retirement migrants' family ties generally report positive family relationships adapted to a transnational context (Huber & O'Reilly, 2004; Repetti & Calasanti, 2020). The most frequent form of contact appeared to be telephone or video calls, through which retirement migrants received and provided emotional

support, and stayed involved in their family members' lives (Baldassar, 2007; Hall & Hardill, 2016; Rojas et al., 2014). Studies found that the majority of retirement migrants visited their country of origin at least once a year and were visited in the country of destination about as often (Casado-Díaz, 2006; Casado-Díaz et al., 2014; Lardiés-Bosque et al., 2016; Rojas et al., 2014).

Although these studies provided major insights into the retirement migrants' transnational ties, most of these studies focused on a single aspect of the parent-adult child relationship, even though face-to-face contact is affected differently by migration than digital contact or emotional closeness. Studies are also descriptive rather than explanatory: they describe retirement migrants' characteristics and social context, but do not empirically test whether these factors explain differences in terms of how people keep ties to their children. As a result, we know little about the variation in intergenerational relationships of retirement migrants and what may explain these differences. This partly relates to the small-scale nature of most studies, which makes it difficult to assess the generalizability of their findings. Often, studies employed snowball sampling techniques and focused on single countries, mostly Spain or Mexico, so that we know little of more isolated individuals or people in less common destinations.

Our study examines the relationship between retirement migrants and one of their adult children. In doing so, we contribute to the intergenerational solidarity and retirement migration literature in three ways. First, we consider three types of intergenerational relationships: (1) face-to-face contact, (2) digital contact and (3) emotional closeness. By differentiating types of interaction, we may capture nuances and ambiguities in parent-child relationships that remain invisible when looking at a single indicator. Second, we combine theories from the intergenerational solidarity and migration literature to explain differences in parent – adult child relationships of retirement migrants. More specifically, we examine the role of contact opportunities, contact needs, family structures, cultural values and migration specific factors. Third, we study intergenerational relationships of retirement migrants from one origin country in many different destinations. We collected data from a representative sample of Dutch nationals aged 66-90 who were born in the Netherlands and migrated after age fifty (Henkens et al., 2022). These data shed light on the generalizability of previous findings and the importance of the destination country context.

2. Data and methods

Data and sample

In 2021, we collected data for the survey of Dutch Retirement Migrants Abroad (Henkens et al., 2022). The sample, drawn by the Dutch Social Insurance Bank (SVB), was based on a national stratified random sample of Dutch international retirement migrants. We invited individuals who were aged between 66 and 90 years old, born in the Netherlands and who migrated to one of 40 most popular destinations for retirement migration (covering 98% of the population) after accumulating at least 70 percent of public pension. This means individuals had lived in the Netherlands for at least 35 years between ages 16 and 66. The combined self-administered paper-and-pencil and online survey was completed by 6110 respondents, which accumulates to a response rate of 45.1%. We focused on respondents with children over age 18. Our final sample consisted of 3068 retirement migrants. The questions regarding family relationships concerned a focus child. In case people had more than one child, respondents were asked to reflect on the relationship with the child who had the first upcoming birthday to randomize and avoid birth order effects.

Measures

We examined three types of intergenerational relationships, measured by four outcome variables. Face-to-face contact measured by visits made to adult children and visits received from adult children in the past year. Digital contact was measured by the frequency of telephone or internet contact in the past year. And for emotional closeness respondents were asked how close they were with this child on a 5-point scale.

We explained variation in the dependent variables by five set of explaining factors. The *opportunities for contact* were measured by parents' socioeconomic status (education and income) and the geographical distance. The *needs for contact* were measured by parents' health problems, age, social integration and extraversion. For *family structure*, we included parent's gender and marital status, child's gender and marital status, presence and age of grandchildren and number of children. *Cultural norms* were measured by parent's religiosity and postmaterialist values. Finally, *migration specific factors* were measured by the duration of

residence, average temperature in the destination, parent's housing quality and prior family ties in the destination.

Analysis plan

We estimated ordinal logistic regression models on the four outcome variables.

3. Results

At the moment, we are in the process of analyzing the data. Below, I outline our preliminary key findings. The opportunity structure for interaction plays an important role in terms of the frequency of contact, but does not seem to shape emotional closeness between retirement migrants and children. This suggests that it is possible to remain close ties over greater geographical distances. Counter to the expectation that children would respond to their parent's needs for contact, health status, age and limited social integration do not seem to be strong predictors of receiving intergenerational support from children. Patterns of the family structure fit with well-established mechanisms in the intergenerational solidarity literature, such as that relationships are strongly gendered and strong negative effects of divorce and repartnering. The child's characteristics follow similar patterns, but with smaller effect sizes. The destination attractiveness is mainly important for how often migrants receive visits from their children, particularly housing quality played a role.

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