

Adult Children's Union Status and Contact with Mothers: A Comparative View Using Within-Family Fixed-Effect Models

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Statement of the problem

Increasingly fragile intragenerational bonds increase the demand for intergenerational contact and support (Bengtson 2001). Moreover, increasing longevity has also resulted in more years of shared lives across generations and thus has heightened the potential for such intergenerational transfers. Yet, this potential may not be fully realized as some family transitions (both among parents and among children) and non-traditional family forms (such as unmarried cohabitation) seem to reduce the frequency and quality of intergenerational exchange (Hogerbrugge, Dykstra, 2009; Schenk, Dykstra 2012).

Recent research based on child-parent dyads drawn from the population in a particular year (Yahirun, Hamplová 2014) indicates that **adult children living in cohabitations interact with their mothers less often than children living in marriage**. This finding is based both on within- and between-family comparisons. Some scholars use a causal argument to explain this association: it should be the lower institutionalization and social recognition of unmarried cohabitations that produce this effect.

We find this interpretation to be dubious as both union status and frequency of contact may depend on unmeasured variables (such as familialistic norms and perceived obligation to keep contact with kin). Thus, **the cross-sectional association may be spurious**.

Research question: We explore if adult children's union status indeed correlates with the frequency of contact with their parents.

Data and method

We rely on statistical analyses of **existing survey data**. **SHARE** (Survey of Health and Retirement in Europe) data are used as the primary source.

SHARE samples the 50+ population across 19 countries. Many SHARE respondents have several children with varying marital/partnership statuses. Thus, we can conduct within family comparisons to reduce the risk of omitted variable (at the family level) bias.

Dependent variable is frequency of contact per year (measured by a 7-point scale ranging from “never” to “almost every day”, transformed to the # number of contacts per year, logged).

Child-level control variables are: sex, age, employment status, and parenthood status.

Our analytical sample includes all SHARE respondents who have at least two adult, biological non-coresident children aged 25+. There are 15,396 such mothers. They have 38,531 children. Children are nested within mothers and can be studied using hierarchical linear models.

We apply **respondent fixed-effect models with continuous or ordered dependent variables** (frequency of contact) to control for various potential sources of omitted variable bias.

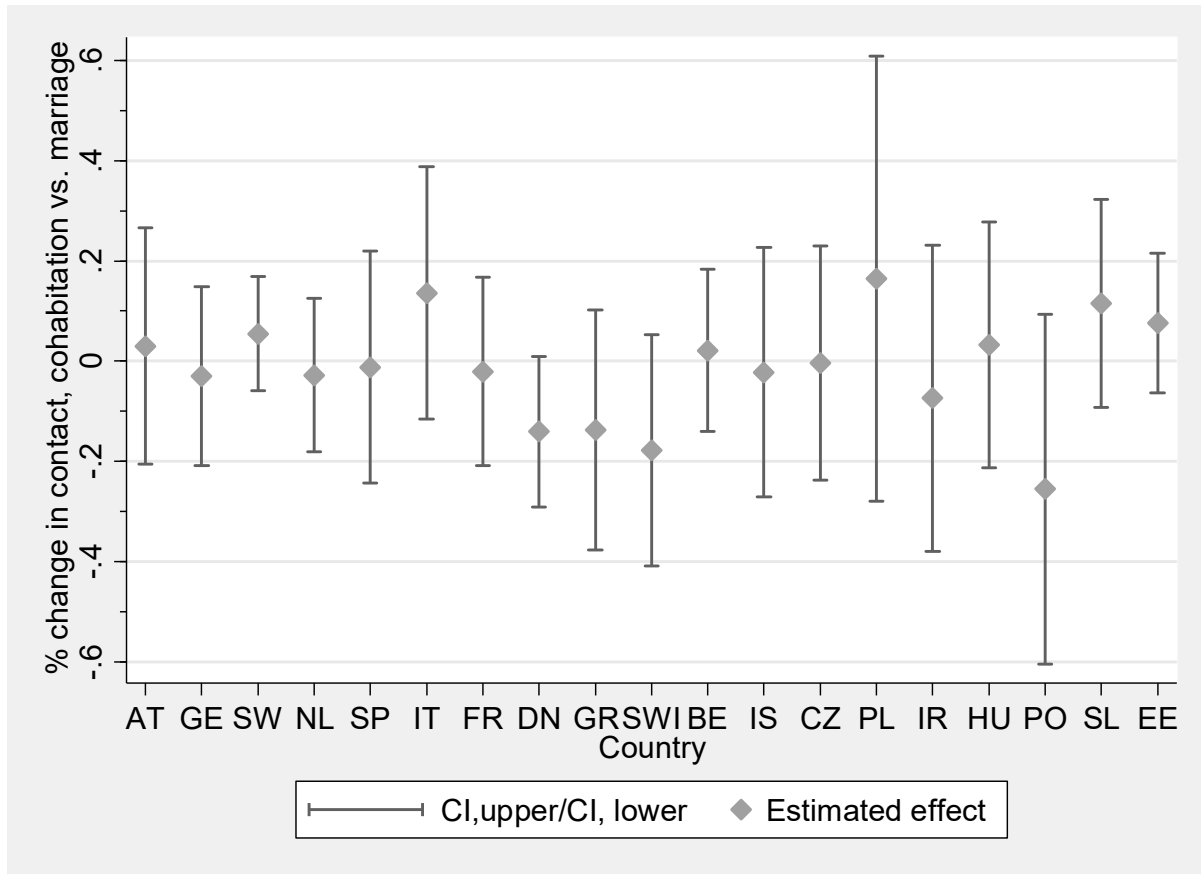
We **split the analysis by country**, to obtain one estimate of the union status effect per country. We then explore the size of this union status effect across countries and correlate its size with selected macro-level variables (such the prevalence of unmarried cohabitation, share of children born out-of-wedlock).

Findings

We find that **almost no differences between married and cohabiting children persist in fixed-effect models**. Thus, we conclude that the effect of union status on intergenerational contact can be interpreted causally only to a very limited extent.

Further, we find little systematic variation in the **size of the union status effect across countries (as shown in the figure below)**.

Figure 1: Estimated effect (and its confidence interval) of adult child’s union status (cohabitation vs. marriage) on the number of contacts with mother (logged) per year. SHARE respondents aged 50+ in selected European Countries.



References

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