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Intergenerational relationships in Germany: A review of insights from pairfam

Karsten Hank



Intergenerational relationships in Germany: A review of insights from *pairfam*

Karsten Hank^a

Abstract

The current article aims to take stock of the main insights into intergenerational relationships in Germany gained from the German Family Panel (*pairfam*) since its start in 2008. We review about 30 studies based on *pairfam* and present findings from (a) longitudinal and multi-actor studies, (b) studies investigating the complexity, diversity, and cultural variability of intergenerational relationships, as well as (c) research linking *pairfam* with other data sources. Over the past decade, *pairfam* has accomplished its mission to obtain information on intergenerational relations simultaneously and complete, in a life-span perspective, from a panel and multi-actor design, and to account for cultural variability of intergenerational relationships and for institutional settings in cross-national comparisons. With *pairfam*'s upcoming transition to the German Family Demography Panel Study (*FReDA*) an uncommon situation emerges, in which the termination of a successful project's initial funding brings about extraordinary new opportunities. We may therefore expect to see yet another boost in research on intergenerational relationships in Germany over the coming decade.

Key words: intergenerational relationships; *pairfam*; longitudinal analysis; multi-actor design; family complexity & diversity

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1. Introduction

After 14 waves of data collection, the German Research Foundation's (DFG) long-term funding of the German Family Panel (*pairfam*) expires in 2022. Next to advancing research on couple dynamics and partnership stability, childbearing, as well as parenting and child development, moving forward the study of *intergenerational relationships* has been one of *pairfam*'s primary aims (see Huinink et al., 2011). The present article aims to take stock of the main insights gained into this field based on *pairfam* since its start in 2008.

Obviously, *pairfam* has not been the first or only data source allowing detailed analyses of intergenerational relationships in Germany. Since the turn to the 21st century and Marc Szydlik's (2000) seminal study of 'lifelong solidarities' between generations – based on the first round of data from the German Ageing Survey (DEAS) – a growing body of empirical investigations has emerged, showing that the overall quality of adult intergenerational relations in Germany has, *first*, remained very stable across recent decades (Steinbach et al., 2020) and, *second*, takes an intermediate position in the Continental European continuum of intergenerational family solidarity with, for example, average levels of parent-child geographic proximity, frequency of contacts, or support exchanges (see, for example, Hank (2009) and Szydlik (2016) using SHARE data). *Third*, and finally, distinct classes of adult parent-child relationship qualities within German families were identified: These are quantitatively dominated by 'amicable' and 'detached' types, but also comprise smaller shares of 'ambivalent' and 'disharmonious' relationships (Silverstein et al., 2010; Steinbach, 2008).

This kind of research – in Germany and elsewhere – was mostly triggered by an interest in intergenerational solidarity in *aging* families (e.g., Bengtson & Roberts, 1991). The primary focus was thus on the perspective of older parents, whereas *pairfam* mainly takes the complementary perspective of adult children (see Steinbach et al., 2019). Most importantly, however, *pairfam* was designed to improve the availability of data suitable for in-depth analyses of intergenerational relations. In an expertise for the Council of Social and Economic Data (RatSWD), Nauck & Steinbach (2009) identified a number of deficiencies limiting the research potentials of previous national and international data sources, resulting in the recommendation that "future data structures [should] obtain information on intergenerational relationships (1) simultaneously and complete, (2) in a life-span perspective, (3) from a panel design, and (4) a multi-actor design. Studies should [also] (5) account for cultural variability of intergenerational relationships and (6) for institutional settings in cross-national comparisons."

Reviewing published research based on *pairfam* data, the remainder of this article aims to answer the question of how and to which extent *pairfam* has been successful to overcome the shortcomings discussed by Nauck & Steinbach (2009): We present findings from longitudinal (*Section 3.1*) and multi-actor studies (*Section 3.2*), studies investigating the complexity, diversity, and cultural variability of intergenerational relationships (*Section 3.3*), as well as research linking *pairfam* with other data sources (*Section 3.4*). The concluding section offers a brief outlook on perspectives for future research using *pairfam* and its successor, the German Family Demography Panel Study (*FReDA*). To begin with, however, we provide a concise introduction to *pairfam*'s questionnaire module on intergenerational relations.

2. pairfam’s questionnaire module on intergenerational relations

pairfam’s questionnaire module on intergenerational relations was developed on the basis of the solidarity-conflict model proposed by Bengtson and colleagues (e.g., Bengtson et al., 2002; Bengtson & Roberts, 1991) and was designed to collect data on the model’s core dimensions “simultaneously and complete” (Nauck & Steinbach, 2009). The core module was fielded in each wave, complemented by an additional set of questions covering the domain of functional solidarity in every other round of data collection (from Wave 2 through Wave 8); see *Table 1* for a detailed overview of questions and answer categories.

Information was collected for primary respondents’ relationships with up to three biological and non-biological parental figures (plus, in Wave 8, parents-in-law). Moreover, as part of pairfam’s multi-actor design, anchor respondents’ parents were directly surveyed – as secondary respondents – from Wave 2 through Wave 8. This allows to account for adult children’s and parents’ perspectives on their relationship simultaneously (Steinbach et al. 2019). See <https://www.pairfam.de/en/documentation/questionnaire/> for the full content of all questionnaires.

Table 1: Overview of pairfam’s questionnaire module on intergenerational relationships

Dimensions of the solidarity-conflict model	Questions	Answer categories
<i>Associational solidarity</i>	How often do you have contact with your [parental figure], adding up all visits, letters, phone calls, emails etc.?	Daily; Several times per week; Once per week; 1-3 times per month; Several times per year; Less often; Never
<i>Structural solidarity</i>	How much time do you need to get to your [parental figure’s] residence? (on a normal day, using normal means of transportation)	We live in the same house; Less than 10 minutes; 10 minutes to less than 30 minutes; 30 minutes to less than an hour; 1 hour to less than 3 hours; 3 hours or more
<i>Affectual solidarity</i>	How close do you feel emotionally to your [parental figure] today?	(1) Not at all close – (5) Very close
<i>Functional solidarity</i> (only in Waves 2-4-6-8) - emotional support	With reference to [parental figure]: During the past 12 months, how often did you ... - give/receive advice regarding personal problems? - talk about her-his/your worries and troubles? - give/receive gifts of money or valuables (more than 100 € per gift)?	Never; Seldom; Sometimes; Often; Always

and to observe *within-person changes over time*, which is essential for the identification of causal effects (see, for example, Huinink & Brüderl, 2021: Section 4). The following studies demonstrate this:

Fang et al. (2021), for example, examined whether youth and parent perceptions of intergenerational contact, closeness, and conflict change during the *transition to adulthood*, and how these relationship characteristics vary as a function of life course experiences, such as education, residential and relationship status. Latent growth models revealed that parent–child contact and conflict decreased, whereas parent–child closeness remained relatively stable from ages 17 to 22. Youth coresidence with parents was associated with higher levels of youth- and parent-reported contact and conflict, but youth student and relationship statuses were not related to changes in parent–child relations.

In another study, Min et al. (2022) employed fixed effects regression models to examine support exchanges between adult children and their parents across various *life transitions*. Next to considering transitions into and out of marriage, the authors investigated effects of entering parenthood. Becoming a mother was found to be associated with receiving more instrumental support from parents and receiving less material/financial support among adult children closer to their parents. When adult children became a parent, emotional and instrumental provision to mothers decreased. This is in line with Tanskanen’s (2017) within-person investigation, which showed that emotional closeness and intimacy between sons and mothers decreased after the birth of a first child. The contact frequency between daughters and mothers, however, increased after the arrival of the first child (also see Salzburger, 2015). Both studies thus point to gender-based differences in intergenerational relations.

Another critical life event potentially impacting intergenerational relations is *parents’ transition to long-term care*. This has been investigated by Diederich et al. (2021), whose results show that children respond to a parent’s need for long-term care by increasing inter vivos transfers. Whether children provide this or other kinds of support to parents in later life may, however, depend on the support they previously received from their parents. Investigating within-person effects, Hämäläinen et al. (2020) found an increase in the frequency of emotional support that a son had received from a parent to be positively associated with subsequent provision of financial support for that parent. Additionally, an increase in the frequency of practical help that daughters received from their fathers was positively associated with subsequent provision of financial aid to their fathers.

The exchange of intergenerational support has also been shown to play a significant role in adult *children’s propensity to migrate* within Germany. When Hünteler & Mulder (2020) investigated the ‘binding effect’ of living close to one’s parents, they found living close to one’s parents to be negatively associated with the likelihood of migration, but part of this association was explained by intergenerational support: The more the instrumental support an adult child exchanged with parents, the less likely it was to migrate. Receiving emotional support from the parents was, however, associated with an increase in migration propensity.

Whereas the emotional bond between adult children and their parents can also be maintained over longer distances, it is also important to account for the fact that intergenerational relationships exhibit considerable heterogeneity (e.g., Steinbach, 2008) and need not always be close or intact. In the final longitudinal study to be mentioned in this section, Arránz Becker & Hank (2022) thus analyzed the prevalence and predictors of children’s *estrangement* from non-coresident biological mothers and fathers during young and middle adulthood. They found that over a ten-year observation period 9% of children experienced at least one episode of estrangement from their mother and 20% reported estrangement from their father. Importantly, neither continuously estranged relationships nor multiple

transitions into and out of estrangement were the rule. Disruptive family events and, particularly, children's estrangement from 'other' (biological or non-biological) parental figures turned out to be the most important predictors of being estranged from a biological parent, especially from fathers. Finally, children expressing stronger familistic attitudes were less likely to experience estrangement.

3.2 Multi-actor studies

Exploiting pairfam's multi-actor design, which includes seven waves of interview data collected from anchors' parents, allows to avoid potential distortions resulting from (a) single-reporter bias and/or (b) different evaluations of parent-child relationship qualities by generation, as suggested by the 'inter-generational stake' hypothesis. Even though this latter bias has been suggested to be small and substantively negligible (Steinbach et al., 2019; also see Kopp & Steinbach, 2009), the availability of data gathered directly from anchor's parents still provides a valuable source of information. The following studies demonstrate this:

Family sociologists and demographers have collected ample evidence indicating that family behaviors and attitudes are transmitted from one generation to another. Building on this research, Hank et al. (2017) investigated whether, in three-generation families, relationship quality between the middle generation and the oldest (that is, grandparent) generation predicts relationship quality between the youngest generation of adolescent children and the middle generation. Using anchor and parent data, multilevel models revealed evidence of intergenerational transmission of emotional closeness, conflict, and ambivalence. Transmission was more consistently observed when emanating from ties to grandfathers than from ties to grandmothers.

Arránz Becker & Steinbach (2012) also take a three-generation perspective, linking data collected from pairfam's primary ('anchor') respondents with information derived from the parents' and children's questionnaires to examine the strength of *relationships between grandparents and grandchildren*. The authors found that personal resources (such as employment status) barely matter in grandparent-grandchild relationships, whereas social resources (that is, the grandparent-parent relationships and grandparents' partnership status) and familistic attitudes do play a significant role. Moreover, pronounced regional differences were identified, indicating stronger grandparent-grandchild relations in Eastern Germany.

pairfam's design and broad coverage of family relations not only allows multigenerational analyses along vertical lines, but also investigations of the *interplay between inter- and intragenerational* (that is, horizontal) relationships in the family system. Johnson et al. (2017), for example, examined bidirectional associations between the development of adults' conflictual and intimate interactions with their parents and intimate partners (using five waves of anchor and parent data). Autoregressive cross-lagged latent change score modeling results revealed a robust pattern of coordinated development between parent-adult child and couple conflictual and intimate interactions: Increases in conflict and intimacy in one relationship were contemporaneously intertwined with changes in the other relationship. Additionally, prior couple intimacy and conflict predicted future parent-adult child relations in half of the cross-lagged pathways examined, whereas parent-adult child conflict and intimacy was only associated with future couple interactions in one pathway.

In a similar vein, Johnson et al. (2021) conducted a study examining spillover and compensation processes in self-disclosure and conflict in adults' relations with intimate partners and siblings. Even

though siblings have – unfortunately – not been covered by pairfam’s multi-actor design, the introduction of a biannual ‘*siblings*’ module in the anchor survey from Wave 5 onwards substantially enhanced pairfam’s potential to analyze *families as systems* (and not just as a set of seemingly unrelated dyadic relationships). Exploiting this opportunity, Hank & Steinbach (2018) investigated how intergenerational solidarity between parents and adult children is associated with intragenerational relations between siblings. In line with predictions derived from family systems theory as well as social learning and attachment theories, hierarchical linear regression results provided general support for the assumption that inter- and intragenerational relations reinforce each other. The authors also found evidence for the existence of partially compensating relationships, though: More frequent conflicts with parents, for example, not only predicted more frequent conflicts between siblings, but also greater intimacy. Finally, focusing on the effect of the first parental death, Hank (2021) detected an overall intensification of siblings’ relationship with each other as well as significant spillover effects from respondents’ relationship with the surviving parent to their sibling relations.

3.3 Studies investigating the complexity, diversity, and cultural variability of intergenerational relations

pairfam not only allows analyses of complex multigenerational family relations across vertical and horizontal lines (as was shown in the previous section), but also allows to assess *complex* – and increasingly common – *family structures* encompassing biological and non-biological parent-child relationships. The following studies demonstrate this:

Klaus et al. (2012), for example, analyzed intergenerational relationship qualities of adolescents and young adults who have *two* father relationships. The relationship with the mother was not only found to be the closest one emotionally, but it was also highly predictive for the relationship of children with stepfathers and biological fathers. Coresidence was identified as a central determinant of children’s relationship with their fathers, often putting biological fathers at a disadvantage. If children have left the parental home, a strong trend towards increasingly distant and weak relationships with both fathers was observed. Whereas the study by Klaus et al. (2012) was conducted from the adolescent/adult child’s perspective, Arránz Becker et al. (2013) took the parents’ perspective when examining differences in parental closeness across relations with multiple coresidential and non-coresidential adolescent and adult children. A multilevel analysis across families revealed a strong positive effect of biological descent on closeness in comparison to adoptive and steprelations (partially explained by selection via parental resources and attitudes). Moreover, within parent fixed effect analyses suggested that the relative disadvantage of stepchildren was offset by longer duration of the stepparent–stepchild relationship, for example (also see Arránz Becker et al., 2015). Note that such ‘step-gaps’ have also been observed in sibling relationships (Steinbach & Hank, 2018) and – using DEAS data – in grandparent-grandchild relations (Steinbach & Silverstein, 2020).

Next to allowing investigations of the structural complexity of intergenerational relations, pairfam also provides rare opportunities to account for *diversity* in adult parent-child relationships. One such example is Hank & Salzburger’s (2015) analysis of gay and lesbian adults’ relationship with parents in Germany. Even though the authors found indication of modestly lower levels of emotional closeness to both parents and evidence for less frequent contacts of homosexual children to their fathers, their results overall suggest that adult gay and lesbian children’s relations to parents do not differ substantially from those observed among their heterosexual counterparts.

Moreover, “accounting for *cultural variability* of intergenerational relationships” (Nauck & Steinbach, 2009; italics not in the original), Baykara-Krumme et al. (2011) compared emotional closeness and contact frequency in native intergenerational relationships and Turkish as well as repatriate (*Aus-siedler*) families. Whereas natives and repatriates barely differed from each other, respondents of Turkish origin expressed a substantially greater emotional closeness to parents. This difference remained even after accounting for socio-demographic characteristics and geographic proximity. Migrants also were less likely to report conflicts with parents, but this initial gap diminished (for repatriates) or even disappeared (for Turks), once confounders – such as proximity, number of siblings, and value orientations (familialism, religiosity) – were controlled. Cultural variability in intergenerational relationships may, however, not only be assessed by comparing natives and different immigrant groups in one country, but also by cross-nationally comparative research. Obviously, this approach requires a linkage of pairfam with external data sources, as will be shown in the next section.

3.4 Studies linking pairfam with other (*international & national*) data sources

Intergenerational relationships are not only shaped by parent-child characteristics but also by the institutional and cultural setting in which families are located (Nauck & Steinbach, 2009). Because pairfam is based on established concepts and measurement instruments – such as the solidarity-conflict model or the Network of Relationships Inventory (see *Section 2*) – ex-post harmonization with external data sources is often feasible. pairfam thus has the potential to contribute unique German data to cross-nationally comparative research on intergenerational relationships, which has been demonstrated in several studies by Nauck & Ren (2018; 2021), for example.

Linking pairfam with data from the U.S. National Longitudinal Study of Youth (NLSY97), the Taiwanese Youth Project (TYP), and the China Family Panel Studies (CFPS), the authors demonstrated that differences in coresidence patterns within the two patrilineal, collectivistic East Asian societies and within the two bilineal, individualistic Western societies were as important as the differences between these two groups of societies (Nauck & Ren, 2018). In a follow-up study, Nauck & Ren (2021) investigated whether young adults’ subjective well-being varied depending on their coresidence with kin and cross-culturally. Differences between patrilineal, patrilocal kinship systems in East Asia and bilineal, neolocal kinship systems in Western societies became evident in lower levels of subjective well-being when living alone or in single-parent families in China and Japan, compared to Germany and the United States. Despite the differences in kinship systems, institutional regulations, and opportunity structures, living in a nuclear family of procreation was associated with the highest level of subjective well-being for young men and women in all four countries.

pairfam’s analytic potential for the study of intergenerational relations may, however, not only be enhanced by linkages with *international* data sources, but pairfam may also be linked with other *national* data sets. Barschkett et al. (2022), for example, investigated intergenerational effects of grandparental care using pairfam’s information on child health, children’s socio-emotional skills, and parental satisfaction measures as well as information on children’s school outcomes derived from the German Socio-Economic Panel Study (SOEP). Whereas their results suggest null or negative effects of grandparental care on children’s outcomes, the authors found positive effects on parental satisfaction with the child-care situation and leisure. Finally, pairfam was used as a reference study to compare recent German emigrants’ transnational intergenerational relationships – observed in the German Emigration and Remigration Panel Study (GERPS) – with those in the population of non-emigrant ‘stayers’ (see Erlinghagen & Hank, 2021). The authors did not observe any fundamental differences between both groups,

but rather found a common pattern of intergenerational solidarity among emigrants and stayers characterized by a high frequency of at least weekly contacts and predominantly downward flows of financial transfers.

4. Conclusions & perspectives for future research

After our review of almost 30 studies using pairfam data to analyze intergenerational relationships in Germany, the answer to the question of whether pairfam has accomplished the mission to obtain information on intergenerational relations “(1) simultaneously and complete, (2) in a life-span perspective, (3) from a panel design, and (4) a multi-actor design [and to] (5) account for cultural variability of intergenerational relationships and (6) for institutional settings in cross-national comparisons” (Nauck & Steinbach, 2009) is a clear ‘yes’. Over the past decade, pairfam has become a well-established and widely used data source for students of intergenerational relationships in Germany and beyond (reflected not only in a growing number of international users, but also in the steadily increasing number of pairfam-based publications in leading international outlets, such as the *Journal of Marriage and Family*) – and despite the termination of the DFG’s long-term funding in 2022, the prospects for future research are bright:

First, the 14 waves of pairfam data collected between 2008 and 2022 are by far not fully analyzed yet and still offer many unexploited opportunities: Have you, for example, ever considered analyzing pairfam’s information – collected in Wave 8 – on respondents’ relationship with their parents-in-law (e.g., Kim et al., 2015; Willson et al., 2003)?

Second, pairfam, with its focus on young and middle adulthood, can be complemented by other high-quality data sets such as the German Ageing Survey (DEAS), the Generations and Gender Survey (GGS), or the Survey of Health, Ageing and Retirement in Europe (SHARE), which focus on later life and allow analyzing intergenerational relations in Germany over time (e.g., Steinbach et al., 2020; Wetzel & Hank, 2020) and/or from a cross-nationally comparative perspective (e.g., Hank, 2009; Steinbach & Hank, 2016).

Third, and most importantly, despite the termination of its DFG funding, the pairfam sample will not be discontinued, but anchor respondents and their partners will be further interviewed as part of the *German Family Demography Panel Study* (FReDA; see Schneider et al., 2021), currently funded by the Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF). This will not only add further waves of observations to the existing panel, but the formal linkage with the Generations and Gender Survey – as part of FReDA – will substantially improve the potential for cross-nationally comparative research. We are thus in the uncommon situation that the termination of a successful project’s initial funding brings about extraordinary new opportunities – and we may therefore expect to see yet another boost in research on intergenerational relationships over the coming decade.

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