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Children's union status and contact with mothers: A cross-national study

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Abstract

Background: In North America and Europe, population aging challenges the institutions responsible for elder care. In these environments, older individuals rely on offspring to provide social, instrumental, and financial support. However, reliance on offspring, and offspring's provision of support, depends on several factors.

Objective: In this paper, we examine how offspring's union status is associated with maternal contact, distinguishing between offspring who are married, cohabiting, or single.

Methods: We use data from the U.S. Health and Retirement Survey and the Survey of Health, Aging, and Retirement in Europe to compare the association between adult children's union status and contact with mothers. Our sample consists of 9779 mothers and 20,795 of their adult children across 15 countries. We employ multi-level analyses to account for variation in contact across and within family units and country contexts.

Results: We find that across all countries, cohabiting offspring have the least contact with mothers compared to married or single offspring. However, the effects of marriage are not universal and vary greatly across countries. In some countries, marriage is associated with less contact with mothers; in others, marriage binds generations together and intergenerational contact is greater than when offspring are single. Differences between married and cohabiting offspring also vary across contexts. We interpret these findings in light of cross-national variation in norms of parental obligations, public support for the elderly, and kin relationships in weak versus strong family systems.

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